

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA): BACKGROUND & OVERVIEW

CONCERNING PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE GUEMES ISLAND FERRY SCHEDULE

JANUARY 24, 2008

CONTEXT

On May 30, 2006, Skagit County adopted Resolution Number R20060184. The resolution amended the schedule of the Skagit County owned and operated Guemes Island Ferry, which runs between Anacortes and Guemes Island by adding five (5) additional runs (at 6:30 p.m., 7:00 p.m., 8:30 p.m., 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.) on Mondays through Thursdays. The pre-existing scheduled runs on Mondays through Thursdays (from 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.), Fridays and Saturdays (from 6:30 a.m. to 12:00 midnight), and Sundays and holidays (from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.) were essentially unchanged. The resolution only approved a two-year trial period for the expanded service, which expires on June 30, 2008. Because the action addresses existing and future demand for ferry service and is not expected to impact future land use decisions or result in a need for additional terminal space, dock improvements, parking, or road improvements, it has been determined to be a non-project action under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA).

In 1997, Skagit County adopted its Growth Management Act (GMA) Comprehensive Land Use Plan (the Plan). An environmental impact statement (EIS) was prepared in conjunction with this document. The Plan underwent major updates and associated environmental review in 2000 and 2007 (i.e., with the adoption of the County's seven-year plan and development regulation update required under the GMA). The Plan, as amended, establishes the land use designations and zoning that currently apply on Guemes Island. These designations are predominately low-density resource and rural, with over 99% of the land base of the island designated Rural Intermediate (RI, 1 dwelling unit per 2.5 acres), Rural Reserve (RRv, 1 dwelling unit per 10 acres) and Rural Resource NRL (RRc-NRL 1 dwelling unit per 40 acres).

The above-mentioned previous environmental analyses conducted by Skagit County have not specifically addressed the potential relationship between expanded ferry service and the rate and timing of growth on the island under the adopted land use scheme, or the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts such growth may or may not have on groundwater quantity and quality. To ensure an informed SEPA and substantive decision-making process, Skagit County intends to conduct supplemental environmental review of the proposed expanded ferry

service prior to the Board of County Commissioners reaching a final decision on whether or how to permanently adjust the schedule and hours of operation.

The proposed analysis will take the form of an Environmental Assessment (EA) Report to be prepared for the advice of the County's SEPA Responsible Official in advance of a SEPA threshold determination on proposed permanent modifications to the ferry service schedule.

This document describes the alternatives proposed for analysis, and the particular issues of environmental concern to be addressed in the subsequent EA.

It is anticipated that this EA Report and a SEPA non-project checklist for the proposed amendments to the Guemes Island ferry service schedule will be submitted to the County's SEPA Responsible Official in April 2008, with a SEPA threshold determination issued by the County shortly thereafter.

Potential Ferry Service Impacts - Generally

The outcome of the current process will be the adoption of a revised, and potentially expanded, service schedule for the Guemes Island Ferry. The level of ferry service to the island must be consistent with, and supportive of, the land use designations adopted under the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan (1997, 2000 and 2007). The adoption of a modified ferry service schedule by the Board of Commissioners will not, in and of itself, entail construction or other physical actions. Accordingly, the proposal is a non-project action under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA, RCW 43.21C). Because the proposal is a non-project action, the analysis and description of impacts within the EA Report will provide an overview of the impacts that could generally be expected under the various ferry schedule alternatives.

Once a new ferry schedule is adopted and implemented by the County, there may be site-specific public and private projects that could have more direct (i.e., project-related) impacts on the environment. Each of those projects could be subject to further environmental analysis under SEPA.

The EA Report will present information about the relative impacts of the alternatives described below. The alternatives, except Alternative 1 - No Action, represent expansions of the ferry service to Guemes Island to accommodate the ridership demands and development anticipated to occur under the County's previously adopted land use and zoning designations.

The SEPA rules (i.e., Chapter 197-11 WAC) acknowledge that less detailed information is available on the impacts associated with the adoption of non-project actions, and allows the discussion of alternatives at a level appropriate to the scope of the proposal. SEPA encourages discussion of alternatives as different means to accomplish a stated objective. In this case, the level of detail

will be island-wide, as each alternative describes a ferry service schedule to accommodate the present and future needs of Guemes Island residents under the previously adopted Comprehensive Plan land use and zoning designations. The alternatives will be considered in light of their ability to accomplish the objective of efficiently serving growth and development anticipated under the previously adopted land use pattern, as well as their environmental impacts.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ALTERNATIVES

Three (3) alternatives will be reviewed in the EA Report, as follows:

1. **No Action (Pre-Existing Plans and Regulations)**. This alternative is provided for baseline comparison purposes, and remains a viable policy option for the community and Board of Commissioners. Under this option, ferry service would not be expanded, and instead, the level of service would revert back to the level provided prior to the passage of County Resolution Number R20060184 (i.e., the scheduled crossings presently occurring at 6:30 p.m., 7:00 p.m., 8:30 p.m., 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays would be discontinued).
2. **Modestly Expanded Service**. This alternative anticipates that approximately four (4) scheduled crossings would be added over the no action alternative, during evening hours on Mondays through Thursdays, concluding by 11:00 p.m. The current level of service offered on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays would remain essentially unchanged.
3. **Current Expanded Service**. This alternative anticipates that approximately five (5) scheduled ferry crossings would be added over the no action alternative, during evening hours on Mondays through Thursdays, concluding by 11:00 p.m. The current level of service offered on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays would remain essentially unchanged. This alternative is most similar to the level of service currently being provided on a trial basis under Board Resolution Number R20060184.

Under both of the “action” alternatives (i.e., alternatives #2 and #3) the County may also initiate schedule changes reflective of seasonal demand (i.e., with more runs and later service times offered during summer months and fewer runs and an earlier conclusion to service in winter months).

General Assumptions for the Alternatives

All of the alternatives assume that the adopted rural and resource land use designations and zoning applied to Guemes Island will remain essentially unchanged, giving the island a capacity for approximately 1,584 dwelling units (i.e., 957 future dwelling units, in addition to the 627 existing units).

All of the alternatives also assume that the County must adopt transportation infrastructure, including ferry service, that is consistent with, and supportive of, the rural and resource land use designations adopted for Guemes Island in Skagit County's 1997 Growth Management Act Comprehensive Plan as amended through 2007.

Finally, all of the alternatives also assume that the critical areas on Guemes Island, including critical aquifer recharge areas, will continue to be identified and protected through implementation of adopted policies and critical areas regulations.

ELEMENTS OF THE ENVIRONMENT TO BE ANALYZED

The purpose of the EA Report is to explore the potential impacts of potentially expanded ferry service to Guemes Island upon the environment. Stated more specifically, the EA Report will help to determine what additional or different impacts are posed if expanded ferry service is permanently adopted that were not previously anticipated or analyzed under the original Skagit County Comprehensive Plan and its EIS (1997) and subsequent amendments thereto.

The analysis will draw largely upon existing planning and environmental documents that provide the foundation for the study (e.g., the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan and supporting environmental analysis, the Draft Guemes Island Sub-Area Plan, Hydrogeology and Quality of Groundwater on Guemes Island, Skagit County, Washington (prepared by the USGS in 1995) and any related studies and documents prepared by Skagit County). Studies from other similarly situated jurisdictions that have provided or expanded ferry service to rural islands with groundwater quality and quantity issues (e.g., San Juan County, Whatcom County, Pierce County) will also be reviewed.

As lead agency, Skagit County has identified the following areas for analysis within the EA Report:

- I. Natural Environment:
 1. Water
 - a. Surface water runoff/absorption;
 - b. Groundwater movement/quantity/quality; and
 - c. Water supplies.
- II. Built Environment:
 1. Land Use:
 - a. Population and development patterns; and
 - b. Housing;
 2. Transportation:
 - a. Ferry transportation system; and
 - b. Movement/circulation of people or goods.

The supplemental analysis conducted through the EA Report will examine the direct and indirect environmental impacts of potential expansions to ferry service to Guemes Island, and will specifically address the following areas of inquiry:

- The total theoretical dwelling unit and population holding capacity of the island under the presently adopted land use and zoning regime.
- The existing hydrogeology, quantity and quality of groundwater on Guemes Island, and the potential for impacts thereto under the adopted land use scheme, paying specific notice to:
 - Long-term water availability impacts occasioned by potential development under the adopted land use scheme, including sea-water intrusion issues; and
 - Long-term water quality impacts occasioned by on-site septic systems associated with residential development under the land use scheme.
- The potential for expanded ferry service to affect the rate and timing of growth and development on the island, potentially accelerating the timeframe during which groundwater quantity and quality impacts may be encountered.
- The potential for expanded ferry service to induce growth and development on the island not anticipated under the adopted GMA land use and zoning regime, creating pressure to convert areas to higher intensity residential development, and thereby adversely affecting the rural character of the island.
- Potential mitigation measures that could be implemented by the County to either:
 - Eliminate any identified significant adverse environmental impacts associated with expanded ferry service; or
 - Reduce such impacts to a level of nonsignificance.
- Identification of any significant irreversible changes associated with the proposed action.

ANTICIPATED PROCESS

Interested citizens, agencies and affected tribes are encouraged to comment on the proposal and the scope of issues to be reviewed within the EA Report. Comments may be submitted regarding the proposed alternatives, the scope of issues to be assessed, and any other concerns you may have regarding the proposal.

Skagit County Planning and Development Services will conduct a Community Workshop from **2:00 to 4:00 p.m. on Sunday, February 10, 2008, in the Guemes Island Community Hall, 7549, Guemes Island Road, Guemes Island, WA 98221**. The workshop will provide an opportunity to ask questions concerning the potential scope and timing of the environmental review, and to submit comments regarding the environmental issues to be analyzed.

The deadline for submitting written comments on the scope of the EA Report is **4:30 p.m., Friday, February 15, 2008**. Please send written comments to the address of the SEPA Responsible Official, listed below. Written comments may be mailed, faxed, or dropped off in person. *E-mail correspondence will not be accepted.*

Once completed in late March or early April, the EA Report and a SEPA non-project checklist for the proposed amendments to the Guemes Island ferry service schedule will be submitted to the County's SEPA Responsible Official. The SEPA Responsible Official will then consider the information and issue a threshold determination sometime in April 2008. The threshold determination may take one of three forms:

- A determination of significance (DS), concluding that the proposal poses probable significant adverse environmental impacts, and requiring preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) prior to final legislative action by the Board of Commissioners (see WAC 197-11-360);
- A mitigated determination of non-significance (MDNS) specifying changes or mitigation measures to reduce environmental impacts associated with the proposal to a level of non-significance (see WAC 197-11-350); or
- A determination of non-significance (DNS) concluding that the proposal poses no probable significant adverse environmental impacts (197-11-340).

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