

A new beginning to an old ferry tale

NN may resurrect service to Norfolk to complement possible high-speed rail line

By Fred Carroll
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NEWPORT NEWS -- It's a new twist on a mostly outdated mode of transportation: a high-speed ferry carrying rail passengers, tourists and commuters between Newport News and Norfolk.

Newport News officials are exploring the possibility of ferry service - nearly 50 years after regular runs ended here - as state and federal officials consider a high-speed rail connection between Richmond and Hampton Roads.

"It's very theoretical," said Mayor Joe Frank. "The question is whether it's practicable."

Until now, city officials have talked about linking rail service between the two cities by way of the Third Crossing, a bridge-tunnel expected to cost more than \$4 billion.

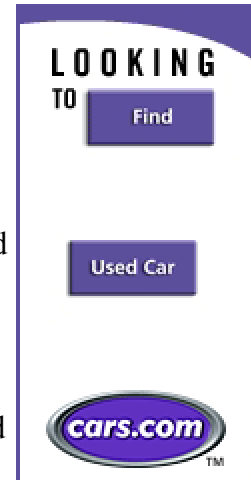
That's still the plan, but there's no money or schedule for construction. Hampton Roads voters overwhelmingly rejected a tax increase in 2002 to pay for the bridge-tunnel and other roadwork.

Meanwhile, Newport News officials see ferry service as an alternative to loading passengers into buses slowed by traffic congestion. Frank hopes commuters and tourists enjoy ferry trips enough to keep a fleet running even after the bridge-tunnel opens.

Ferry service from Newport News ended about the time the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel opened in 1957.

A ferry operated between Hampton and Norfolk from 1999 to 2002, but it suspended service when a federal grant expired.

Officials at Hampton Roads Transit are looking for federal dollars that might pay for a waterfront rail station in Newport News near 23rd Street, which is about the same location where rail passengers boarded ferries decades ago.



City officials hope to offer fast boat trips along with high-speed rail service.

The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation will hold a public meeting March 23 in Williamsburg about proposed high-speed rail service between Richmond and South Hampton Roads. Rail officials are considering two routes: either through Petersburg and Suffolk or through Williamsburg and Newport News.

Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim supports looking for ways to pay for ferry service. He said Norfolk could build a downtown terminal somewhere between Nauticus and Waterside Festival Marketplace, possibly at a \$30-million cruise-ship terminal now being designed.

But Fraim wants ferry service for the existing passenger service provided by Amtrak. He prefers the proposed high-speed rail route that bypasses the Peninsula.

"Hopefully, someday the Third Crossing will permit continuous rail service," Fraim said.

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