Sound Transit to help Island with parking

by CELINA KAREIVA, Mercer Island Reporter News Reporter

Jan 1, 2014 at 10:00AM  updated Jan 2, 2014 at 10:49AM

By early morning most days, every spot of Mercer Island’s Park-and-Ride is filled. The city has long been aware of the issue. Now a fix might be in reach.

Sound Transit has agreed to commit up to $6 million to address overcrowding of the Park-and-Ride, mitigation for the mobility lost by the construction of light rail in I-90’s center HOV lanes.

The existing Park-and-Ride consists of 447 stalls and two stories. Even after a 2006-08 expansion of the lot, scaled back by council to be slightly smaller than its original footprint, the Park-and-Ride is packed like sardines most weekdays. Many of those cars come from off Island, commuters from either Seattle or other Eastside cities, who use the lot and transit center during the day.

“We’re working with Sound Transit to see how to address that challenge," said city manager Noel Treat. “One of the things we’d most like to accomplish given how crowded our current Park-and-Ride gets and that Island residents often get there and find it’s full before they’re able to park, is to find a way to work with Sound Transit to get parking just for Island residents, so that they have some certainty they can drive to the Town Center, park and take public transit.”

Treat says the city isn’t interested in expanding the existing Park-and-Ride. The structure can’t support another level so for financial and practical reasons, council and staff are looking at alternatives in the city’s Town Center. Early conversations have generated three sites after a previously discussed Walgreens location was taken off the table. They include Auto Spa car wash, Dollar Development’s planned location for a boutique hotel and a site at the intersection of S.E. 24th Street and 76th Avenue S.E. owned by Leon Cohen.

If one of the three sites was selected, it would likely be developed as a mixed-use project with office space, a hotel or other structure sprouting up alongside the added parking.

But preliminary discussions raise some concerns that the three sites aren’t big enough. Cohen’s property, for instance, would need to acquire additional land to meet the city’s goal of 180 spots.

Light rail won’t begin rolling until 2023, when it will snake from Rainier Station in the International District, across I-90 and pause at a station in the center roadway, adjacent to the Park-and-Ride. From there it will continue across I-90 to south Bellevue. Though East Link’s ribbon cutting is more than a decade out, the city hopes a solution will emerge before then.

"Parking will be done sometime well before light rail comes to the Island," said Mayor Bruce Bassett. “But exactly what the timing is, we don’t know yet.”

Many ideas have been tossed around in the past about the over-capacity Park-and-Ride, ranging from a bus to shuttle commuters between church parking lots, to permits, issued by the city, allowing only residents to benefit from the lot. Others have suggested some combination of the two. Final plans for Sound Transit’s $6 million hinge on several different factors, though. For one, the city is cognizant of the existing Park-and-Ride’s off-Island use and worries a new site wouldn’t deter users from driving a short distance for the extra lot.
“Mercer Islanders need to know they will find parking close to light rail. If we build more parking that fills with commuters from the Eastside, we won’t have solved the problem,” says Bassett. “As a Council we’ll be looking closely at this.”

Also this year, Sound Transit is expected to begin construction of R8A, a new HOV lane in I-90’s outer roadway, compensation for the center HOV lanes that will eventually be occupied by the train. But because East Link’s completion date is almost a decade out, Bassett says MI hopes to partner with others cities in the region to ask “fairly forcibly” if the existing HOV lane can’t be occupied in the time between when construction wraps and East Link begins service.

“As we understand it, the proposed East Link schedule would have the center lanes closed for seven years before light rail service begins,” says Bassett. “That’s a long time. We, and all users of I-90, will want to understand the schedule better and will likely advocate for as short a closure time as possible.”

The important thing now, says Bassett, is to engage residents.

“We want council and the public to start to engage in this discussion. Where do people wish to land on this?” he asked. “It’s complicated because there are so many different moving parts.”

An extended city council study session, including representatives from King County Metro and WSDOT is tentatively planned for Jan. 21, though that date may change. City council’s planning sessions would follow later in the week on Jan. 25 and 26.

Find this article at www.mi-reporter.com/news/238002851.html