Wave of the future
Seaside communities moving to put water routes to work for visitors and commuters
By Steven Rosenberg
Globe Staff | July 31, 2008

It's 8 in the morning and Edison Forbes is staring out the window of a high-speed ferry at picturesque Gloucester Harbor, waiting for the vessel to make its trip to Provincetown. Forbes, a Danvers retiree, hasn't been to Provincetown in decades, but he's already been up for hours looking forward to the trip.

"We don't have to drive; no one wants to drive," he said, almost giddy at the thought of spending part of the day on the ocean.

An hour later, on a dock in Salem, dozens have gathered to board the commuter ferry to Boston. With numerous daily runs between May and November, the ferry is in its third year and has grown precipitously - carrying 40,000 passengers in 2006 and doubling that load in 2007. City officials expect this year's count to surpass last year's numbers.

"The ocean is therapy, it's beautiful, there's no cars," said Peabody's Jill Weaver, who was planning to spend the day in Boston.

Her husband was more philosophical. "This should be the future," Bill Weaver said.

Thinking ferry service will play a major role in transportation, many seaside communities are lining up to present plans requesting state funds to subsidize the construction of piers and docks. Lynn is in the midst of a three-year, $3 million plan to build a dock and pier at Lynn Harbor for a year-round ferry service that could take commuters to Boston in 15 minutes. In Winthrop, officials hope to launch a pilot ferry service to Boston from the town's new pier.

Louis Elisa, executive director of the state's Seaport Advisory Council - the state agency that subsidizes municipal ferry projects - said the new focus on water transportation serves communities two ways. "It's not just an alternative form of transportation that takes cars off the road, but it also brings people in and stimulates the local economy," said Elisa.

In Gloucester, a city hard-hit by numerous budget crises that have forced the shuttering of fire stations and an elementary school, Mayor Carolyn Kirk is looking toward the city's storied harbor for revenue.

"It's amazing that given the resource that we have of the Atlantic Ocean, that the time for it hasn't come sooner," said Kirk.

Kirk said the daily ferry to Provincetown - which began service last month - is helping stimulate the downtown economy by bringing tourists into the city. "We want the walking wallets in our city," she said.

In addition, Kirk also is lobbying the state to subsidize the construction of a $2 million water taxi ferry project that could shuttle visitors across the city's storied harbor. "Gloucester is a popular destination and becoming more so, and traffic management and people movement is a critical part of the strategy. So, we're saying, let's get the cars off the street, get them parked, and move people throughout the city," she said.
While the push for water transportation builds, one of the area's largest high-speed ferry owners said seasonal excursions and water taxi service are the most sustainable options for cities.

"I think the likelihood of growing out commuter-based services outside the confines of Boston Harbor are marginal at best," said Rick Nolan, who owns Boston Harbor Cruises and launched the Gloucester to Provincetown ferry. "But, with regard to seasonal excursion-based expansion from Boston to other port communities within Massachusetts Bay, there's all sorts of potential opportunities."

In eastern Massachusetts, just four Boston commuter ferries run year-round - from Quincy, Hingham, Charlestown, and Logan Airport. Nolan runs the Hingham and Charlestown commuter routes, and has more than 20 ferries that service commuters. With each boat costing at least $4 million and gas running 40 percent higher than last year, he said profit is slim for boat operators. Nolan uses his boats during commuter off-hours for whale watching to help keep the company in business.

Nolan is nonetheless upbeat about short, seasonal day routes that attract retirees and baby boomers. While the Gloucester-to-Provincetown run started slowly with fewer than 100 passengers boarding each day, the appeal is growing.

"The increase in passenger ridership is giving us enough encouragement that we will be here for seasons to come," said Nolan.

Kirk also thinks that seasonal day trips are here to stay. "What we're seeing in our economy, with gas prices, is people staying closer to home but looking for that day trip - like going from Gloucester to Provincetown," said Kirk.

In Salem, where tourism drives the downtown economy and more than 1 million visitors arrive each year, Mayor Kim Driscoll also wants to add water taxis to the city's harbor.

"It's opened up an amazing number of doors, particularly the Boston market," said Driscoll. Ferry ridership is split evenly between tourists and commuters to and from Salem, she said, and with increased marketing, she expects the ferry passenger numbers to continue to increase.

"For us it's been a huge economic stimulator because the folks who are coming out for the day spend money," said Driscoll. And, when visitors arrive in Salem, they have their choice of boarding trolleys or free pedicabs.

For commuters wanting to take the scenic route into Boston, the cost is about double. A roundtrip boat ticket is $22, while the commuter rail costs $10.50.

Sometime in 2010, Lynn officials hope to join the wave from the long dormant public landing at the edge of the Lynnway.

"This is not a dream, this is really going to happen," said James Cowdell, executive director of Lynn's Economic Development & Industrial Corporation. The state already has committed $750,000 for a new pier and dock and dredging part of Lynn Harbor. Mayor Edward J. Clancy Jr. said a commuter ferry would fit in with the city's master coastal plan, which includes removing power lines that obstruct ocean views. "It would hopefully be part of a general renaissance over time, in that area of the city," he said.

Cowdell said a year-round ferry also would be attractive to commuters from nearby Nahant, Swampscott, and Marblehead who drive on the Lynnway to Boston each day. He said the landing, which has room for more than 400 cars, would be big enough to accommodate commuters. Easy parking, and high gas prices, said Cowdell, make the ferry an easy sell.

"It's expensive to drive and if you have a choice between driving 45 minutes to Boston and fighting the traffic, versus a 15-minute peaceful ferry ride, I think that's a pretty easy decision for a lot of people," he said.

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