



Tri-Cities Water Shuttle:

# A Public Transportation Opportunity

Providing Community Access To Our Greatest Natural Resource - The Columbia River

Prepared by:  
 Tri-Cities Visitor & Convention Bureau  
 P.O. Box 2241  
 Tri-Cities, WA 99302  
 509.735.8486 / 800.254.5824  
[www.VisitTri-Cities.com](http://www.VisitTri-Cities.com)



**When diversification and quality of life are a priority, a new mode of public transportation may offer the ability to bolster the economy through business investment and visitor spending.**

## **THE REQUEST**

The Tri-Cities Visitor & Convention Bureau is requesting Ben Franklin Transit’s support and participation in a Market Study and Feasibility Assessment for operating a “water shuttle” along the Sacagawea Heritage Trail.

The Tri-Cities Visitor and Convention Bureau and Tri-Ports have each committed \$5,000 toward a feasibility study. In addition, the cities of Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland have each committed \$3,000, and the Benton Franklin River Heritage Foundation has donated \$1,000. This represents a \$20,000 commitment from the community—demonstrating a cooperative and broad-based interest in exploring the concept of seasonal water shuttle service.

As a public transportation option, the water shuttle concept seems a natural fit with the mission of our local Transit Authority. Therefore, the Tri-Cities Visitor and Convention Bureau, Tri-Ports, Tri-Cities Rivershore Enhancement Council, and Benton Franklin River Heritage Foundation are requesting that the Ben Franklin Transit Authority partner with the community to provide the remaining funding necessary to ensure the study’s completion.

The study is anticipated to cost between \$40,000 and \$50,000 depending on the final research parameters. We envision the study will include proposed routes, seasonality of operation, financial investment, grant opportunities, dock requirements, market potential, and feasibility.

Ben Franklin Transit is also urged to assume the leadership role in implementation and management of the study’s contract, working with an advisory or steering committee comprised of TREC representatives to help draft the assessment objectives and provide assistance in overseeing the research. This arrangement would provide the most cost effective interface with local jurisdictions and complement the activities of the Transit Authority.

## CONCEPT / HISTORY

In 1995, the Bureau formed the Tri-Cities Rivershore Enhancement Council. Since that time, a determined group of community leaders and jurisdictions have been patiently and persistently working to complete the community's vision for its rivershore. The Tri-Cities Rivershore Enhancement Council (TREC), which is comprised of the three cities, two counties, three port districts and corporate partner Bechtel, and administered by the Tri-Cities Visitor & Convention Bureau, has been the champion for shoreline projects and for continued investment in our community's shoreline green spaces and pathways, including the 23-mile Sacagawea Heritage Trail.

This request actually stems from a study conducted by the Waterfront Center, which the Tri-Cities Visitor and Convention Bureau and TREC commissioned in April of 1997. The Bureau applied for and received Federal "3161" grant funds to complete a study of the economic potential deriving from rivershores enhancement. The Waterfront Center is a 25-year old non-profit corporation that works with communities of all sizes; helping them develop plans and projects which maximize the potential of waterfront resources.

The Waterfront Center understands that waterfronts often represent the best opportunity for community enhancement and enrichment. And their philosophy, which was reflected in the Tri-Cities study, is to encourage bold and visionary thinking by communities seeking to create dynamic urban destinations.

The Bureau and the community took the Waterfront Center's recommendations seriously and since that first community input session with the Waterfront Center, many recommendations have been completed. That initial study recommended that the community:

- Work through the Bureau's Rivershore Enhancement Council, meeting regularly for a unified approach to interacting with the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and our congressional delegation. This group has been meeting monthly since 1997
- Create a unified endeavor to lower the levees. This was accomplished in both Pasco and Kennewick; and Richland will lower levee sections this fall
- Form one main "loop" trail throughout the Tri-Cities. A 23-mile shoreline trail connecting the community along the Columbia River is expected to be completed in late 2006
- Name and design a logo for the "loop" trail. The Sacagawea Heritage Trail was named and a logo was adopted by all eight jurisdictions
- Create a major event along the rivershores to focus the entire community & jurisdictions on the importance of the rivers. A year-long series of events was implemented as part of the "1998 Year of the River" campaign

- Light either the Cable Bridge or Blue Bridge. The Cable was the preference, and this community landmark is now lighted at night
- Expand the visitor experience at Sacajawea State Park. The Park and Interpretive Center is currently undergoing \$1.2 million in renovation and improvements. In addition, internationally renowned artist Maya Lin is designing artwork for installation at Sacajawea State Park
- AND last but not least, the Waterfront Center recommended a “water taxi” or “shuttle” as a way to tie our cities, events, trails and businesses together, so that residents & visitors could enjoy, first-hand, one of the Tri-Cities greatest assets—the Columbia River!

## CATALYST FOR QUALITY OF LIFE IMPROVEMENTS

If operated as a mode of public transportation, a water shuttle would provide new river access and improve transportation alternatives for citizens and visitors alike. Indeed, creating a vibrant waterfront destination will raise our community’s visibility as a destination for young professionals seeking both professional and personal fulfillment.

During the past decade, tremendous investment has been made along our community’s rivershores. In addition to the accomplishments listed previously, other improvements include:

- ✓ Two new shoreline hotels and riverfront restaurants were opened
- ✓ Parks and green spaces were improved
- ✓ Riparian habitats were restored
- ✓ Paved trails were added and extended
- ✓ The Playground of Dreams was constructed
- ✓ The Family Fishing Pond was built and revitalized
- ✓ Bateman Island was cleared of debris and revegetated
- ✓ A commercial boat dock was developed
- ✓ A Veterans Memorial was installed
- ✓ The Audubon Nature Trail was improved
- ✓ The Lewis & Clark Interpretive Overlook was constructed
- ✓ A scenic tour boat, and a dinner boat began operating
- ✓ A shoreline trail was added through the Port of Benton industrial park
- ✓ Washington State Transportation began constructing a separated bike trail across the Yakima River Delta
- ✓ Franklin County began work on new boat dock at Road 54
- ✓ The Port of Kennewick created a pedestrian boardwalk around Clover Island

- ✓ Utilities were installed for the Hanford Reach National Monument Heritage & Visitor Center at Columbia Point

These and other rivershore investments are creating a synergy that is transforming our community. Citizens are utilizing the shoreline trails and our park systems and enjoying an improved quality of life. And in fact, residents are demanding more and better access to the river and water activities than ever before.

## CATALYST FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

*Rivers, trails and greenway corridors are traditionally recognized for their environmental protection, recreation values, and aesthetic appearance. However, these corridors also have the potential to create jobs, enhance property values, expand local businesses, attract new or relocating businesses, increase local tax revenues, decrease local government expenditures, and promote a local community. (National Park Service: Economic Impacts of Rivers, Trails and Greenways).*

As envisioned, the water shuttle would be bicycle accessible, offer commuter route options, and increase use of the community's shoreline parks, docks and trail systems. It could encourage patronage for businesses located along trail corridors. And it would allow the citizens of our entire region to better access our natural resource, the Columbia River. Indeed, availability of a water shuttle would help position the Tri-Cities as an active, vibrant, progressive community--assisting with relocation and traditional economic development and recruitment efforts.

In addition to an improved quality of life, a water shuttle may become the catalyst for creating additional business investment and expanding our local tax base by complementing and enhancing the existing waterfront trail system. Trails, parks and greenways, combined with water shuttle access can create an attractive destination for business relocation and industrial recruitment. According to a study by MichiganFitness.org, *"Trails and greenways are a proven way to spur additional development and create an attractive place to live. In fact, trails and greenways have been shown to bolster property values and make adjacent properties easier to sell."*

## SUCCESS WITH WATER TAXIS

Other communities are finding success with water “taxis” or “shuttles”, often funding, operating and maintaining them through their local transit authorities or private business operators.

**The Chanel Cat Water Taxi system which serves the Quad Cities Illinois area is operated by MetroLINK.** Officially named the “Rock Island County Metropolitan Mass Transit District” their current seven day a week bus system serves the eight Illinois Quad Cities of Carbon Cliff, Colona, East Moline, Hampton, Milan, Moline, Rock Island and Silvis Illinois. MetroLINK’s innovation and commitment to improving the quality of life in the Quad Cities comes in many forms including operating the Channel Cat Water Taxi.

MetroLink implemented their taxi service by securing a \$250,000 grant through the Federal Ferry Transportation System which allowed them to purchase two water taxis and to construct ADA-accessible docks and ramps for public use. And in fact, the Quad Cities’ public transit authority has a set policy that their Channel Cat taxi system operates “in the black.”

Other examples of successful water taxi systems include:

**Baltimore Maryland Water Taxis** which has been operating for 25 years, and estimates they’ve boarded 16 million passengers. They compare their operations to a bus line on water, offering continual service from all landings at time intervals of 15 to 20 minutes in season.

**Toledo Ohio’s Maumee River Water Taxi Service** transports riders from downtown Toledo across the river to restaurants and attractions. This community’s shuttle service is offered during lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday and evening river taxi service is offered Friday & Saturday. The Maumee River Water Taxi season runs Memorial Day Weekend - late September.

In **Fort Lauderdale Florida, Water Taxi, Inc.** has been running shuttle service along the Intracoastal Waterway for 17 years. In Florida, they operate a fleet of 16 water buses. Water Taxi, Inc. also operates water bus service in Oklahoma City, and outside of Huston Texas. The Water Taxi allows people to charter or take their chances on getting onboard, because they operate like a bus, where it’s first-come, first-served. The taxis run a continual route with “ambassadors” narrating points of interest along the way. Taxis board every 10 to 15 minutes at the various stops, and a round-trip takes about 40 minutes.

In San Antonio Texas, Rio Taxi Service offers taxi service along the famed River Walk. Stopping continuously at over 39 stops, the Rio Taxi operates daily from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m.; giving passengers an opportunity to relax on the way to a favorite restaurant or hotspot. The Rio Taxi drivers have tickets on board that can be purchased, or they can be purchased in advance at a number of ticket locations.

## **NOW IS THE TIME**

Finally, a critical mass of activities and attractions has developed along our rivershores. The community has seen a surge of new home developments, and an influx of new citizens are demanding more and better access to water recreation, trails, parks and greenways. And now, more than ever before, visitors are choosing the Tri-Cities for meetings, conventions, tournaments, and leisure travel.

The Tri-Cities Visitor and Convention Bureau, Tri-Cities Rivershore Enhancement Council, Benton Franklin River Heritage Foundation and many community businesses, citizens, and visitors are supportive of studying the feasibility of a water shuttle system for the Tri-Cities region.

Completing a feasibility study is an important first step in preparing the community to embrace the activities and attractions that can set us apart as a dynamic, urban waterfront destination. We are not suggesting that the community immediately dive into purchasing and operating a water shuttle. We are instead encouraging the deliberate and careful planning for future growth.

Future transportation grants and other funding may be available should a feasibility study prove the efficacy of a Tri-Cities water shuttle system. Completion of this study will simply prepare our community and establish a framework for exploring future investment as opportunities arise.

In view of the potential benefits of a water shuttle, particularly the public transportation service, the Tri-Cities Visitor and Convention Bureau and its partners urge Ben Franklin Transit's financial support and leadership in the water shuttle feasibility assessment.