

Northern Neck ferry would open markets and help vacationers **by Carolyn Berry**

As the crow flies, Virginia's Northern Neck is less than 100 miles from the Delaware and New Jersey shores. Yet a trip from Cape May, N.J., to Reedville is at least an 8-hour drive.

"Tourists who live in New Jersey and want to vacation at The Tides Inn have a painful choice," said Lee Stephens, owner and president of The Tides Resorts. "They can cross the Chesapeake Bay at Annapolis or drive south and use the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. Either way takes hours and hours."

A more pleasurable trip may be on the horizon.

The Northern Neck Planning District Commission released a study Monday that says ferry service between Virginia's Northern Neck and the Eastern Shore could be a successful, break-even venture.

The study, which proposed terminals at Reedville and Onancock Creek, estimates the ferry annually would generate \$1 million in wages, increase business productivity by \$1.5 million and increase visitor spending by \$6 million.

That's good news said Arthur Carver III, owner of Northern Neck Bottling Co. "The Northern Neck is the most depressed area in Virginia. We have even more unemployment than in the southwestern, coal mining part of the state."

Economic conditions on the Eastern Shore aren't much better. Per capita personal income for both regions is approximately 70 percent of the statewide average. And average annual wages in five of the six counties are less now compared to the statewide average than they were in 1969; 8 percentage points lower in the Northern Neck in 1998 compared to 1969 and 3 percentage points lower on the Eastern Shore.

Located between the Potomac and Rappahannock rivers and the Chesapeake Bay, the Northern Neck is off in a corner by itself. "We have no major highways and the area is relatively undeveloped," Caver said.

But the area has potential, added Bill Carden, president of the Kinsale-based Potomac Supply Corp., a lumber mill. "And the ferry is important. Our geography and connecting highway systems limit our ability to serve the northern and southern markets efficiently. It's not that we don't have wonderful highways. The problem is the peninsula is approximately 75 miles long. There's only one way in and one way out if you're traveling east of Interstate 95. Connecting the Northern Neck by ferry to the Eastern Shore opens up a whole new economic opportunity."

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Trucks from poultry and agricultural farms in the Northern Neck and on the Eastern Shore would be able to move more easily to processing facilities and markets. “There’s lots of potential for farmers, and the lumber mill, which is the region’s largest private employer, would have more access to raw materials,” Carden said. “I would love to connect to the Eastern Shore and purchase raw materials in the form of logs. That would bring economic benefits to that area. If the supply is there and available, we would buy.”

Carden said a ferry system would allow the lumber mill to improve productivity, lower its costs, expand its market and add new jobs.

The study supports Carden’s assessment. Research shows that “for a company moving 100 trucks daily, 10 minutes less time per truck each day saves on average \$260,000 to \$390,000 in out-of-pocket transport expenses over the course of a year (260 weekdays).” Carden’s business moves 75 trucks each day.

“We’re underutilizing the water,” Carden said. “With increasing fuel costs, we have to start thinking about a cheaper means of transportation. There is no cheaper means than water transportation. As fuel prices get higher, water transportation will be more desirable.”

Although the study doesn’t expect the ferry to serve many commuters, work-related trips to Eastern Shore government facilities and the Marine Science Center at Wallops Island could benefit significantly. “I’d be a customer,” said Kilmarnock resident Tom Saunders who works in Cape Charles. “I’m lining up now to buy a ticket.”

Saunders, who stays in Cape Charles during the week, said riding the ferry would allow him to bypass the traffic congestion that plaques Hampton Roads’ interstates. “That is enough to make people look for alternatives.”

The study estimates more than 200,000 people each year would consider the ferry as an alternative. Thirty percent of those users would be tourists and visitors, giving the Northern Neck’s up-and-coming tourism industry the boost it needs.

R. Angus Murdoch, director of the Reedville Fishermen’s Museum, said the ferry “would clearly be an economic development engine for the Northern Neck. This is a wonderful region of the country with miles of beautiful waterfront and very pleasant small towns.”

But the tourist dollars would not stay just in the Northern Neck, they’d float across the Bay as well. “The folks on the Eastern Shore realize that their greatest economic development tool is tourism,” said David Parker, president of Onley-based Bay Hospitality Inc. “The Eastern Shore and the Northern Neck are so much alike. We have lots of natural resources. The [ferry] trip itself would be quite interesting and a great enhancement for tourism. That means dollars for both shores.”

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The ferry's operations would generate lots of those dollars, an estimated \$750,000, for local businesses through the sale of fuel, equipment and supplies. Although the ferry service could generate sufficient revenues to cover vessel lease and operating costs, it is unlikely that the service could produce sufficient net operating revenues to fund any of the capital costs.

Depending upon the sites selected for the terminals, estimated capital costs range from \$3 million to \$12 million per terminal. Potential funding sources include federal, state and local transportation grants. Federal sources include the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, which has provisions for ferry services, and the Federal Highway Administration's Ferry Boat Discretionary Program, which is dedicated to funding the construction of new ferry boats and ferry terminal facilities. This fund provides 80 percent federal grants for eligible projects. More than half of the fund's annual \$39 million is earmarked for the states of Alaska, Washington and New Jersey. The Mid-Bay ferry would be eligible to compete for the remaining \$19 million in annual grants.

Benjamin Humphreys, a member of the Commonwealth Transportation Board, said, "We need alternative transportation methods. We can't depend on our highways. This is an outside-of-the-box opportunity that will impact tourism and commerce. We need to explore the opportunity."

Donald McCann, the planning district's transportation planner, said the commission is going to the next level. "We're going to look at hard numbers." It's also planning to present the study formally to the Eastern Shore's planning districts in late February or early March.

It's possible that within two years, Stephens' guests who live along the New Jersey shore will find their drives to the Tides Inn more pleasurable. "If they could take the Cape May ferry and cross to the Eastern Shore then drive to Onancock and take another ferry to Reedville, that would be extraordinary. Their journeys would be part of their vacations."

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About the author

Carolyn A. Berry, APR, is the Ghostwriter. As a free-lance writer/editor, she enjoys helping her clients tell their stories. She edits two trade association magazines, writes for newspapers and magazines and has written two corporate histories. To learn more, visit her Web site — www.TheGhostwriter.org.