

**FERRY TO NOWHERE?**  
**A PRELIMINARY PERSPECTIVE**  
JUNE 27, 2006

**Summary**

In August 2005 it was learned that Port Sonoma had been given a grant of \$20 million by the Federal Transportation Committee to build a Ferry Building and to buy U.S. made ferry boats. The grand jury thought it was very interesting that such a large dollar amount had been given to a private company. As we would learn, it was the owners of Port Sonoma who had personally gone to Washington to lobby for these funds, not our local representatives. We discovered that it is not unusual for a private company to receive public money. What is unusual, is that it was given to Port Sonoma without being partnered with a public agency and did not have the support of our local elected representatives.

The vision of the owners of Port Sonoma is to use shallow water ferries to carry several thousand passengers each day to and from San Francisco and the East Bay. These ferries would bring tourists to the Wine Country for the day or perhaps a day at the Infineon Raceway. In the other direction, fans could pick up the ferry for a day at AT&T Park.

The total of the Federal Transportation Bill was \$284 billion. Of that, Sonoma County is to receive:

- \$27 million for Hwy 101 between Petaluma and Novato
- \$500,000 for a bike path to parallel 101 between Petaluma and Novato
- \$5.6 million for Hwy. 101 between Santa Rosa and Windsor
- \$20 million to build a Ferry Building at Port Sonoma and to buy U.S. made ferry boats.

In looking more closely at the Federal Transportation Bill and the amount of money that Sonoma County was to receive, under this grant, we realized what Port Sonoma was to receive represented about 37% of the total amount. It should be noted that the owner of Port Sonoma must come up with 20% matching funds. The chairman of the Federal Transportation Committee is from Alaska. Was it a coincidence that AK and Seattle, WA are the primary areas in the United States where ferry boats are built?

The grand jury decided that it might be interesting to “follow the money”. We thought this was an opportunity to see how the system works on a project that is right here in Sonoma County.

We talked with elected county and state representatives and were not able to get a clear picture as to who would be overseeing the money. Would it be part of the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) project? Or would it be a part of Golden Gate Transit, the Bay Area Water Transit Authority, or the Metropolitan Transit Commission?

We questioned whether in reality it would be possible for Port Sonoma to actually get approval to proceed with such a project, in spite of, the issues surrounding the property. After all, public agencies own or protect 3,965 acres of properties adjoining Port Sonoma and environmental concerns are in abundance.

Cited as problems by the various individuals that we interviewed were:

- San Pablo Wetlands
- The California Clapper Rail and the Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse, both on the endangered species list

- Annual dredging due to silt
- The wake and wetland issues
- Urban growth.

### **Background**

As far back as the 1850's, the estuaries linking Sonoma and Petaluma to San Pablo Bay were used for commerce. Dredging was used to allow bigger steamers to get through. At one time, the Petaluma River was the third busiest waterway in the state. Steamboats carried passengers and freight to and from San Francisco. Eventually irrigation required for immense farms depleted the rivers. The last ferry service was in August 1950, ending 103 years of sternwheeler river navigation.

Port Sonoma is located on the east side of the Petaluma River, just south of Highway 37. The first Marina was built in 1968 with a second Marina in 1973. Over the years it has had various owners with the property being used by a dredging company, pleasure boats, marine equipment storage, a bait shop, a fuel station and a boat manufacturing company. In addition to the port, at this location are existing railroad tracks running east-west with an existing swing bridge over the Petaluma River.

In 2000, the port was sold to Port Sonoma Association. In 2003, the new owner also took over the management of the port.

In 1998, the Water Transit Authority (WTA) identified Port Sonoma as a potential ferry terminal location, but Port Sonoma was not included in the SMART sales tax measure to be voted on in the fall of 2006. The SMART report notes "Due to the environmental constraints and county policies that constrain the potential to expand sewer and water service in the area, there is almost no potential for Transit-Oriented Development in the station area". In an April, 2004 SMART report on the Port Sonoma and San Quentin Options, it was stated that having a terminus at Larkspur does not preclude any future expansion to Port Sonoma. For Port Sonoma, a rail shuttle service could be provided from the Novato South Station to a station at a new ferry terminal at Port Sonoma, operating on existing tracks of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad from the junction at Ignacio to Port Sonoma. Cross-platform timed transfers between the Cloverdale to Larkspur (or Cloverdale to San Rafael) rail line and the shuttle service could occur at Novato South Station

### **Conclusions**

From our interviews and from the information we have reviewed, it appears that the funds for Port Sonoma are an "earmark" until it is partnered with a public agency. "Earmarking" refers to the insertion of a provision in federal legislation that designates special consideration, treatment, funding or rules for a federal agencies or beneficiaries. Earmarked funds are obtained primarily as a function of political influence and intervention and are not subjected to external "peer review" or competitive, merit based practices. When the earmark is partnered, the grant funds will become available to the owners of Port Sonoma and only at that time will we be able to determine who will oversee the expenditure of funds. The taxpayers of Sonoma County will want to know what they will be receiving for this \$20 million.

We urge local public officials to follow the progress of this grant to see, if it is possible to fruitfully use the earmarked funds.

### **Commendations**

We admire the courage of the individuals involved with Port Sonoma who, in spite of a huge challenge ahead of them, have a dream, and to this point, have pursued this dream with their own resources.

**Conduct of the Review**

The grand jury interviewed the following:

- General Manager and Rail Planning manager from SMART
- Manager of Port Sonoma
- Sonoma County Supervisor Second District
- District Congressional Representative.
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Documents reviewed:

- Articles from Press Democrat, Argus Courier, NorthBay biz
- Transportation Bill—SAFETEA-LU
- Internet Web Sites for MTC and WTA
- “History of Sonoma County”.