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YVONNE ABRAHAM

New Lynn ferry has ripple effect

By Yvonne Abraham | GLOBE COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 28, 2014



LYNN — Can a boat transform a city?

It can definitely remake a commute. At the end of a scrubby street in Lynn, bleary-eyed commuters leave their cars on a newly-paved lot and file onto a ferry. It's 6:30 on a Monday morning, but they're cheerful and chatty — calling crew members by name, snapping pictures from the windy deck.

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Who can blame them for being happy? Instead of inching along in traffic on the blighted Lynnway, or waiting on a chilly platform to board the commuter rail, they are sailing through calm waters lit by a golden sunrise. After the boat, called the Cetacea, traces an arc by Nahant and passes Revere, Deer Island's glorious digester eggs come into view. Harbor Islands slide by. A plane passes over before touching down at Logan. Thirty minutes after it sets off, the skyline approaches, then — Oh, hi! — the boat pulls up beside the sea lions at the Aquarium. This is one delirious start to the work week.

Fifteen years ago, this Lynn to Boston ferry was but a twinkle in Senator Tom McGee's eye, an idea he got on a boat ride from New London to Martha's Vineyard. For a long time, a lot of people thought he was crazy. Slowly, he built up support in Lynn, then on

Beacon Hill. Eventually, the state put up the money to help build a wharf on Blossom Street, and to subsidize a two-year, summer-only pilot for the ferry, which charges \$7 a ride and costs about \$80,000 a month to run.

Its first season wrapped up on Friday, despite the pleas of passengers, who submitted a six-page petition beseeching authorities to extend the service beyond its already-extended end-date. By the end of August, the ferry had ferried 11,000 riders, far surpassing expectations.

“We’re thrilled with the results we’ve seen,” says Transportation Secretary Rich Davey. The state has its eye on two used ferries that would allow the service to expand beyond its four trips per weekday. Provided the next administration is on board, and sets aside the money to continue it, the Lynn ferry might do for the North Shore what the Hingham ferry did in the south — grow a year-round cult following, spur development.

Lynn sure needs it. You’d be hard-pressed to find a city in the Commonwealth with more unrealized potential than this place. What a waste of an incredible location, 20 minutes from downtown by rail, 15 minutes from Logan. Decades of lousy decisions by local officials have squandered hundreds of acres of prime land. On the waterfront are car dealerships, storage facilities, fast food spots, big box stores, long-abandoned buildings, and weed-choked lots.

But now that it has the ferry, Lynn is getting big ideas. Jim Cowdell, who heads the city’s Economic Development and Industrial Corporation, just applied for a grant to put a new ticket office and restaurant by the wharf. A few seconds away, a giant swath of land that has been vacant for 16 years has just been sold to a developer who intends to build 238 waterside residential units. Cowdell says the ferry was a major selling point. Further down the Lynnway, two other long-fallow parcels appear set to bloom, with more housing for potential ferry devotees. Cowdell is talking about a harbor walk, and transformation.

“I have seen it in other places,” Cowdell says. “A lot of stars are aligned right now. This area is about to take off.”

All over the state, we’ve seen examples of how investing in transportation brings giant returns. An entire new community has sprung up around Wellington Station in Medford. Investing \$29 million in a new Orange Line stop at Assembly Square has spurred a \$1.5 billion mixed use development.

The payback from transportation investments is often lost in the battles over priorities and appropriations. Sadly, it will probably be lost, too, in the battle over the gas tax ballot question. If it passes, Question 1 would take a \$2 billion bite out of the state's transportation plans over the next decade. That means fewer projects like the Lynn ferry.

If only more voters could have taken a ride on it. That boat carried much more than chuffed passengers. Also on board: The dreams of a city that could use a big break, at long last.

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