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**Yahoo! News** Fri, Apr 16, 2004

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## Full speed ahead for new ferries



Tue Apr 13, 7:08 AM ET

By *John Ritter, USA TODAY*

Highway congestion that plagues many regions is bringing a long-neglected mode of travel back in vogue: ferry boats.



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A new class of lightweight aluminum craft that can cruise up to 55 mph and carry hundreds of passengers and dozens of vehicles has the ability to pull more people out of their cars than conventional ferries.

Four new routes featuring sleek, high-speed vessels, some offering movies and slot machines, will be running by June 1, the biggest surge in ferry travel in years.

New technology that slashed travel times has made ferries more competitive with auto and even airline travel over some routes. A new line opening next month between Rochester, N.Y., and Toronto will cut a four-hour road trip, often marred by Customs and bridge delays, almost in half.

"People want to get where they're going quickly. That's the attraction," says John Snyder of *Marine Log*, a shipping industry trade journal. "High-speed vessels make routes viable that at one time weren't because of the time factor."

Passengers are quick to embrace ferries when the boats suit their needs.

New Jersey commuters to Lower Manhattan switched to taking ferries across the Hudson River when a subway line was suspended after 9/11.

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Experts see promising markets for high-speed ferries across the Great Lakes, from Chicago on Lake Michigan to Cleveland and Erie, Pa., on Lake Erie, where ferry studies are underway.

Hawaiian officials are eager to promote high-speed service between the islands, where ferries that allow passengers to take their vehicles would compete with airline hops. The Spirit of Ontario got rousing welcomes when it toured Hawaii on its 16,000-mile journey from Australia, where it was built, to New York.

High-speed lines from Long Island into New York are under consideration. And there has been talk of service from Cape Cod to Nantucket. On the Gulf Coast, Tampa and Mobile, Ala., are likely

destinations.

Ferries have served San Francisco Bay and Puget Sound for decades, but stagnant growth in those markets is primed for a turnaround, experts say.

Miami to Havana would be lucrative if the U.S. government lifted travel restrictions. The island nation is just 90 miles from the USA.

"Cuba one day is going to be huge," says Chris Pemberton, a vice president of Austal USA, a subsidiary of an Australian company that built Spirit of Ontario.

Faster, lighter, better

The mini-boom in ferry service pales next to the heyday of ferries in the 1920s and 1930s. Before bridges on San Francisco Bay made cars the preferred form of commuting in the area, ferries there logged 50 million passengers a year - compared with 6.5 million today.

Fourteen ferries once steamed across Lake Michigan between Wisconsin and Michigan. Today, only one survives.

"I think we're going to see sustained growth," Snyder says.

Boosting speed was crucial. Hulls built of aluminum instead of steel cut a boat's structural weight in half. Double-hull, catamaran-style designs reduce drag in the water. Engineers have ramped up engine horsepower without adding weight.

Federal subsidies also have fueled ferry development. The Senate's 2005 highway bill includes \$720 million for ferries and terminals. A House version that will be reconciled in a conference committee calls for \$430 million, still nearly double current funding.

Demand for grants that pay up to 80% of a project's cost will exceed whatever money Congress makes available, experts say.

"It's a huge incentive," Snyder says. "Every state has its pet project it wants to push through."

#### More ferry funding

Federal funds are helping to build three new boats for the Staten Island Ferry in New York City. One of the fleet's ferries crashed into a pier Oct. 15, killing 10 people.

Officials of the San Francisco Bay Area's new Water Transit Authority are seeking subsidies for three new lines. Those won't require high-speed service because costlier high-tech boats aren't practical when they shave only minutes off short routes. But future lines to the northern and southern parts of the bay likely will be high speed.

Renewed interest in Bay Area ferries stems from frustration over some of the nation's most congested highways. Last year, voters approved raising bridge tolls by \$1 beginning in July to create the new transit authority and finance new lines. The Bay Area's nine counties are being pressed to include ferry funding when they ask voters to approve extensions of a half-cent sales-tax increase in November.

"Ferry riders are very loyal," says Steve Castleberry, the authority's chief executive. "They just haven't had a voice at the table until now."

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