

# New Berkeley ferry offers alternative to crowded commutes

Tideline Marine Group began operating ferries out of the Berkeley Marina earlier this year, to some commuters' delight. Others wonder if ferries are a viable transit option.

By Natalie Orenstein

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Since January, Tideline Marine Group has operated two ferries between the Berkeley Marina and San Francisco. Photo: Natalie Orenstein

On a nippy morning earlier this week, the yacht harbor at the **Berkeley Marina** was tranquil and empty, save for the people still asleep in their boats.

At 7:30 a.m. a couple dozen doctors, tech workers and lawyers rolled up in cars and on bikes, and filed onto the Heron, a new ferry offering **daily commuter service between the Marina and San Francisco**. Despite the chill, most of the riders chose the seats outside the cabin with exposure to wind, mist and the smell of the sea. Some took out their phones to reply to emails, and others closed their eyes, listening to the white-noise drone of the engine.

With capacity for just 40 riders, the ferry cannot do much to alleviate the congestion on the Bay Bridge, or the overcrowding on BART, but it does offer its riders a smoother and more serene commute.

“Being on the water feeds my soul,” said Andy Knapp, a doctor who lives in West Berkeley and works at Davies Medical Center in the Castro. He eagerly abandoned his “depressing” BART commute when he heard about the new ferry.

The limited capacity gives the boat the feel of a private shuttle, and some joked that they don’t want their secret to get out.



Berkeley residents ride into the city on a 7:30 a.m. ferry. Photo: Natalie Orenstein

The Heron is one of two water taxis operated in Berkeley by **Tideline Marine Group**, a private company running two trips to the city each weekday morning, and two return trips each evening. The ride between Berkeley’s K dock, by Hana Japan, and San Francisco’s Pier 1.5, just north of the Ferry Building, takes about 25 minutes.

Tideline and another private company, Prop SF, secured **permits from the California Public Utilities Commissions in 2016**, allowing them to provide public service in the state. They still operate as private

enterprises, but the permits allow them to advertise their schedules and accept walk-on riders.

In light of the new state licenses, the city of Berkeley created a year-long pilot program allowing the companies to use the Marina. In January Tideline became the first provider to operate a public ferry out of Berkeley since ferries filled in during the aftermath of the Bay Bridge collapse in the 1989 earthquake. Prop SF did not ultimately request a permit from the city, said Berkeley spokesman Matthai Chakko.



The view from the boat. Photo: Natalie Orenstein

In the coming months, the city will begin evaluating the success of Tideline's service with the intention of possibly developing a permanent ferry program.

Chakko said city staff will have to consider a number of questions: "How many people are using it? Should we go out for an RFP? What kind of impact is it having on the docks and on parking? Is there a maintenance impact?"

Tideline, along with other private charters, pays the city a \$35 fee per ferry trip, plus \$1 per customer. The fares are \$8 each way or \$290 for a monthly pass, and riders can park for free at the lot across the street. Coffee, beer and soda are for sale on board. Tideline also runs private trips, cruises on the Bay and trips to Giants games. A third boat will join Tideline's fleet in June, and the company is looking at adding an additional line to the public service schedule.

"We've been embraced enthusiastically by commuters," said Nathan Nayman, Tideline's president. Nayman said his small operation does not burden the environment or the public.

"We don't require dredging. We're not talking about building big ferry terminals," he said.

**Parks and Waterfront** Commissioner Paul Kamen, a naval architect who has researched urban water transit, questioned the ability of Tideline's boats to stay afloat at the current cost without public subsidization.

Although he was once a vocal advocate for a ferry terminal at the Marina — hoping it would bring in federal funds to keep the channel dredged — Kamen said public ferries are not the future.

"We all love ferries," he said. "They're fun to ride, they're relaxing and restorative. But it's not a viable transportation solution."

In order to carry enough people to take pressure off the roads and train tracks, ferry systems require significant subsidies, Kamen said. The Water Emergency Transportation Authority, which runs the large commuter vessels that go between the East Bay and San Francisco, is supported by state funding and bridge-toll revenue. That money, in Kamen's opinion, could be better spent on improving other modes of transit.

"It's not a cost-effective solution to getting people in and out of the city. Both buses and BART get people from a Point A closer to where they live to a Point B closer to where they're going," he said.

That "last mile" problem — the issue of getting people to and from the ferry docks — does dog Tideline and many ferry systems, Nayman said.



A crew member at work wears a lifejacket while some riders opt for a warmer trip inside the cabin. Photo: Natalie Orenstein

A crew member at work wears a lifejacket while some riders opt for a warmer trip inside the cabin. Photo: Natalie Orenstein

In Berkeley, the Tideline ferries are accessible by AC Transit line 81, and riders can — and do — bring bikes aboard. Nayman said Tideline is talking with land transit providers, and UC Berkeley’s transportation demand management program, in hopes of coordinating services.

The Heron passengers also said they would like to see Tideline operate more lines out of Berkeley, such as at 8 a.m. in addition to the current 7:30 a.m. and 8:30 a.m., as well as later return trips out of San Francisco, where the final voyage begins at 6:30 p.m.

Heather Kelly, a Berkeley resident who takes the ferry to her job at a San Francisco global health nonprofit, has to take the train home because she leaves in the afternoon to pick up her kids.

But the morning ride has made a difference. After dealing with transit delays and crowding during her previous commutes, “I was arriving at work feeling cranky,” Kelly said.

She looked around at her fellow passengers.

“It’s much friendlier than BART for sure.”

**37 comments**

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