

Column: Water taxi service may expand for new riverfront developments



By Mary Wisniewski · Contact Reporter
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One of the nicest ways of getting around in and near the Loop are water taxis. These bright yellow or white boats cruise around the “Y” of the Chicago River, carrying commuters and tourists between the Metra stations and other downtown and near-downtown stops as far south as Chinatown and as far north as North Avenue. They are quicker than buses during rush hour and infinitely more pleasant — a way to get the wind in your hair and see riverside architecture for around \$2 a ride.

Planned development along the river has led to talks between Chicago Water Taxi, part of Wendella Sightseeing, and builders about adding new stops north and south of downtown, starting in the next two to three years.

“...it’s a no-brainer”

- Zack Cupkovic - R2 Companies

“We think it’s a no-brainer to add a couple more and make it an amenity for the thousands of residents and employees we’re going to have at Goose Island,” said Zack Cupkovic, director of special projects for R2 Cos., which owns about 10 percent of Goose Island as well as the Morton Salt property. The developer plans office space, bars and restaurants and entertainment for the sites.

“We’re talking to a lot of tenants and they’re all excited about the prospect of having more water taxis,” added Cupkovic.

Andrew Sargis, chief of operations for Chicago Water Taxi, said his company has been meeting with developers and is interested in more stops, though it wants to wait until projects are ready so it is clear what locations would be best.

“We want to make sure we do it right,” said Sargis. “Their timeline dictates our timeline.”

Right now, Chicago Water Taxi has seven stops — Ogilvie/Union Station, Michigan Avenue, LaSalle Street, the Chicago Riverwalk at Clark Street, North Avenue, Chinatown and its recently added location at Chicago Avenue. The boats run from March into December. A one-way pass is \$5, which is steeper than a bus ride, but you can get bargains in bulk — a 10-

ride weekday pass is \$20 and a 31-day pass \$60, making it an attractive alternative for some commuters.

Shoreline Sightseeing, known for its architecture tours, also has water taxis, though they cater to tourists more than commuters, with a shorter daily schedule, a calendar limited to the summer months and higher prices, at \$6 to \$10 a trip for adults. Shoreline also serves a different route, going along the river from Union Station/Willis Tower to Michigan Avenue and Navy Pier, or on Lake Michigan between Navy Pier and the Museum Campus. A Shoreline representative was not available for comment.

Chicago Water Taxi service started in 2007 and has been on an “upward trajectory” since then, seeing more than 400,000 riders last year. It now has four boats, but plans to add a fifth in 2019, Sargis said.

The Metropolitan Planning Council, a Chicago-based public policy research group, issued a report in 2016 supporting “infill” water taxi stations on both North and South branches of the river, and recommended integrating the service into Ventra, transit system maps, on-board announcements, schedules and system planning.

The council’s report also suggested looking at the longer-term feasibility of expanding water taxi service south from Ping Tom Park on the Chicago River and on the Calumet River.

Josh Ellis, vice president for the council, said the docks will likely be built by developers, with Wendella running operations out of them.

“The added residential and employment density anticipated at those sites will help build a customer base, and while the water taxi may not be the fastest option in all situations, it’s a very, very pleasurable one, and that will only further the appeal of these new riverfront areas,” Ellis said.

Ellis said the current water taxi system is “pretty competitive” timewise with the bus or train for some routes, particularly Union Station to Chinatown or to Michigan Avenue.

Sargis said that his company has been influenced by the report, and its first two new locations will likely be on the South Branch of the river. “It looks like there will be a lot of tenants, a lot of activity on the South Branch,” he said.