

Whatcom County Ferry Advisory Committee
September 25, 2024
Minutes

6:00 p.m. CALL TO ORDER – Diane Harper, Vice Chair (sitting in for Chair)

Present: Janice Catrell, Richard Frye, Pam Gould, Diane Harper, Carol Landt, Tom Philpot, Catherine Shornick

Absent: Todd Lagestee

This is an in-person meeting only. A hiring freeze prevents replacement of previous staff support for hybrid meetings; a community volunteer with necessary equipment would be most welcome.

Welcome to Laura Frolich and Roland Middleton, Public Works (PW); Gary Poole, Ferry Master; and Jon Scanlon, County Council (CC)

Agenda stands, other than pending motion from ad hoc Ferry and Terminal Committee

Minutes from August 28, 2024, adopted

COMMITTEE WORK

- **WCFAC member terms and open seats, follow-up:** Chair Pam Gould will send memo to Barry Buchanan; Jon Scanlon will follow through, regarding request adjustment to term appointments so only one-third of members rotate off each year, rather than the current 50%. [See attached]
- **ad hoc Access Committee, update:** Carol Landt reported that many unknowns continue, so ad hoc work has slowed. A letter campaign to inform fellow county citizens of the many needs for and reliances upon the ferry is pending.
- **ad hoc Ferry and Terminal Committee, update:** Tom Philpot reported on a lack of response from WCFAC’s earlier request to CC, PW and County Executive (Exec) regarding four recommended actions for an affordable solution, and therefore emphasized the first two questions. [See attached] Laura Frolich said KPFF is working on, and PW could look into responding in writing; the electronic component is more impactful than the vessel size. The question remains as to what the existing structure can tolerate. Roland indicated a 16- or 20-car ferry was not studied re the Gooseberry side. Diane cited earlier documentation assuming Gooseberry dock being adequate until 2040. Comparison of displacement between the Whatcom Chief and a 20-car ferry is needed.

The ad hoc committee also underscored a recommendation to pursue permission from DOT to downsize the ferry. Laura said 60% of design for 34-car ferry is completed, so the challenge is to meet the timeframe; as well, PW has not been directed to alter plans at this time. Roland said the timeframe will not change; they are looking at means of pivoting but again, there is no direction. It was pointed out that a smaller ferry could lower the overall cost and was included in the initial KPFF documents. Pam reported that KPFF indicated design work was on hold, and Liz Kosa (PW Director) had said she reached out to DOT re the timeline. Roland noted that maritime regulations require that we have funding on our end secured, indicating that federal regulations establishing the RAISE grants set the deadline, so there is no time extension possible. Rich F. asked that a case

be made for the best, affordable ferry within the timeline; such a vessel would also meet level of service (LOS) at three trips/60 cars per hour.

Jon Scanlon will ask Exec for another work session. Jon's focus is on closing the gap between total cost and cost to taxpayers. Sharon Shewmake told him she needs any request for funds by December, and the new county lobbyist is aware of the issue, although needs must be prioritized. Reportedly, the Exec met with federal and state representatives, and some WCFAC members met with Rick Larsen. Legislators underscored that the county must be the entity to reach out. Jon reported that both the General and Road funds are unhealthy; the Exec's budget proposal comes forward in October.

Motion (Shornick; Gould second): WCFAC recommends that the ad hoc Ferry and Terminal committee meet with County Council and request that Council enables that meeting (work session Oct 14, PW, or full CC Oct. 8). Passed unanimously by those present.

Diane said the size of ferry had nothing to do with the benefit cost analysis prepared for the RAISE grant. Roland indicated a 16-car ferry would meet that benefit analysis; Laura said decisions are based on what is wisest for tax base at this time.

- **Ad hoc Level of Service (LOS), update:** Diane H. reviewed a draft letter and information re LOS (see attachments) to consider for October action. LOS can be met by a 20-car ferry; however, public input and WCFAC comments are needed, so information will be available at the library and hopefully elsewhere. Roland said anecdotally, ridership has not returned to pre-Covid levels. Jon said WCFAC might ask for an update to Resolution 2018 026, not a change to LOS.

PW needs direction to investigate options; as to where direction comes from, CC must work with administration to move that forward.

NEW BUSINESS

- Charles Bailey reported that the Climate Impact Action Committee (CIAC) unanimously voted to advise CC to adopt a resolution opposing I-2117. [See attached.] Skagit County was awarded \$18.75M to support their ferry, and Whatcom County could anticipate at least that amount. *Motion (Gould; Philpot second):* WCFAC will send a letter to County Council endorsing CIAC's recommendations. Passed unanimously by those present.
- Laura Frolich, PW, presented an update on the ferry system budget [see attached], including projections, impacts, conclusions, service reduction options, a proposed budget, and a commitment to the ferry system and community. Inflation, insurance, drydock, fuel, fixed costs age of the ferry, suppressed ridership and fixed costs are all causes of *projected* shortfalls and deficient reserves in 2024-25. Increased ridership could provide a cushion, but due to union contracts, service reductions cannot be addressed until the next budget cycle. Annual fare increases are needed to afford the 55%, and to keep the ferry as self-sustaining as possible and

sustainable. PW is recommending limiting punch cards for needs-based only, and increasing fares 10% across all categories effective 2025. Comments can be sent to ferry@whatcom.wa.us and expressed to CC October 8 and 22, and November 6 and 19.

Laura noted that a taxing district has not been enabled at this time so is not available for projection purposes. People could receive notification that they are purchasing into an “impaired transport network” but Islanders would have to decide on taxing themselves. This is just one proposal, but the only one at this time.

WCFAC members expressed frustration that not enough time was allowed for WCFAC to respond to such a dramatic proposal, and that the full burden of shortfalls appears to be falling on Islanders. As well, history has shown that as fare costs increase, ridership decreases, so PW should consider lowering costs for some categories.

Efforts will be made to schedule an additional WCFAC meeting (before October 23rd).

OPEN SESSION

- Bob Anderson noted that the focus has been on lowering costs, and urged serious consideration of purchasing a used ferry to buy time. No service reductions have been suggested, and no cost saving have been included – both of which need to be included, even if it means reopening union contracts. Looking at the expense side is imperative.
- Jim Dickinson advocated for the HiYu at \$1.85M, since it is available now. WCFAC should hold a special session to review the complexities.

Meeting adjourned 7:47 PM.

Upcoming

- October 23, WCFAC meeting; possible additional meeting TBD
- October 8, 22 and November 6 and 19, CC meetings

Attachments: [submitted with draft minutes for county posting]

- WCFAC August 28, 2024, Minutes
- WCFAC Terms
- WCFAC Ferry Alternatives 8.28.24
- Background for LOS letter
- WCFAC letter on LOS 9.24.24 draft
- Climate Impact Advisory Committee to CC
- Whatcom County Ferry System Operations Budget Update

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Submitted by C. Shornick