

Whatcom County Ferry Advisory Committee Meeting (WCFAC)

March 25, 2026 Minutes

Call to Order by Tom Philpot at 6:05 PM

Present: Rhayma Blake, Janice Catrell, Terry Diffley, Thomas Philpot, Markis Dee Stidham, Steven Thomas

Chair – Tom Philpot welcomed the board members, Whatcom County Council Member District 5 Ben Elenbaas; Whatcom County Council Member At-Large Barry Buchanan; Whatcom County Public Works Director Laura Frolich; Ferry Master Gary Poole; Whatcom County Engineering Manager James Lee; kpff Associate Planner Kelly Lesoing; and attendees.

Pledge of Allegiance; Land Acknowledgment; and Moment of Silence

BUSINESS MEETING

Agenda - Accepted as presented.

Minutes February 25 Meeting - Accepted by consensus.

UPDATES

WCFAC Tom Philpot:

- Highlighted the signing of [WA State House Bill 2588](#) by Gov. Bob Ferguson on March 24, 2026. This bill updates the definition of ferry districts to include vehicular as well as passenger only ferries and limits any district taxes to no more than 10 cents per \$1,000 assessed property value.

Ferry Master Gary Poole:

- Dry Dock– The 2026 dry dock outage is now scheduled for April 25 through May 17. The last full day of vehicle service will be April 24. Service is expected to resume May 17, though the return date remains tentative and subject to change. There will be no Island van service this year.
- Next Ferry Outage – April 1st from 10:10AM-3PM for maintenance.
- Wind Events – When asked about recent high wind challenges for the ferry, Gary shared that they typically continue runs during southwesterly winds. Southeasterly winds are more challenging.

Public Works Director Laura Frolich:

- Bill 2588 – Pleased with the passage of the bill referenced earlier. Its passage enables Public Works to introduce the creation of a countywide ferry district at the County Council meeting on April 28th. The levy would be decided later.
- Van Service – Acknowledged there will be some savings by eliminating this service previously offered during dry dock.

kpff Associate Planner Kelly Lesoing:

- New Ferry – Confirmed that the new ferry will be wider and longer than the Whatcom Chief, officially accommodating 20 vs. the current 15 cars. Laura Frolich added that the under-deck design is still being studied. And James Lee shared that the propulsion integration system design is due April 14th. Once those are determined, the design of the rest of the vessel will be studied. Laura confirmed that there will be public engagement opportunities and updates will be provided on the Public Works website under [New Ferry Vessel](#).
- Ferry Outages – Public Works is using X and Facebook to share emergency outage news. To be contacted directly about emergency ferry outages, subscribe to <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/list.aspx?ListID=480> to receive text and/or email notifications.
- Wing Walls – James Lee confirmed the current wing walls have reached the end of their service life and the 2025 dry dock will include the first steps to replace them. A new passenger dock will be included in the 2027 dry dock addressed earlier.
- July-November 2027 and July-December 2028 Extended Dry Docks – kpff and Laura Frolich will support the WCFAC Task Force efforts to identify and address issues associated with both extended outages that have only passenger service. In response to questions from the community,
 - o Markis Dee Stidham and Pam Gould invited all to provide input to the Service Alternatives Planning Work Group.
 - o Fire Chief Michael Lish and others emphasized the importance of effectively addressing the fire department's needs and responsibilities during these outages.
 - o Fuel needs (gas, diesel, propane, and other) are key issues to be addressed. A double-ended barge has been used to support Guemes Island. Ben Elenbass shared that he has two 300-gallon tanks to support his farm's needs and suggested the county do a Request for Proposal (RFP). But land use policy may need to be taken into consideration and changed. Steve Thomas inquired

about land available and insurance implications. Laura shared that it might be situated on county property, but insurance would be the responsibility of the vendor. Liability would need to be determined. And Markis inquired who would man the station(s).

OPEN SESSION

- Michael Lish – The Lummi Island Fire Department is working to identify and hopefully address the island’s and Fire Department’s needs during the 2027 and 2028 extended ferry outages. At a minimum, they need 393 gallons of gasoline for their 2 vehicles and more for the trucks. They will “have to be creative”. Marcis thanked Michael for being involved in the planning meetings. Fire danger is typically at its highest during these months.
- Ralph Steele – The County agreed in 2023 that \$2.7 million of the state’s Motor Vehicle Fuel Tax (MVFT) should have been added to the Ferry Fund 2006-2022 and this has not been done. The County shorted the Ferry Fund by about \$1.0 million in 2023. The County was advised in November 2024 that the MVFT Attributable factors used to calculate what was to be paid into the Ferry Fund were incorrect resulting in \$500-600,000 of funds underpaid from the Road Fund. Ralph has requested reports needed to confirm and these issues have yet to be addressed. “A competent CPA could review the numbers in 3 hours,” according to Ralph. Ben Elenbaas shared that Ben confirmed that a formal resolution to County Council to take action to answer specific questions of Public Works might be appropriate. it has indeed been difficult for County Council to hold county staff accountable. Marcis asked if WCFAC could help with next steps. Janice Catrell suggested that if these reports are not being produced and made public, the money may not be being tracked. This would make it difficult for the request for a ferry taxing district to be taken seriously. Tom Philpot confirmed merit to Ralph’s request and suggested WCFAC might request County Council action. Laura Frolich confirmed that the 2025 numbers would be published by the end of April. Fares are set using an estimate of projected funds. The current code allows Public Works to report as they have been. Perhaps code updates could be requested to make the reporting clearer. Tom Philpot suggested that the WCFAC executive committee meet with Ralph on these issues to craft a request to County Council. Ben and Barry offered to share similar requests as a guide for appropriate form and language. WCFAC would need to vote on this request for Council action. Council “holds the purse strings” and could take action. Tom indicated that the WCFAC board would craft a draft of the request to make available at our next meeting.

- Pam Gould – Asked when the ferry county code was last updated. Laura said August 2023 before she joined Public Works. Pam had worked with others to help clarify code language before then, but these changes had not been adopted.
- Wendi Merritt – Asked how possible ferry funds that might be available through the latest state legislation could be used. Laura said they would be used to construct and repair the ferry infrastructure, the vessel, terminal, and docks. Also reserve funds, terminal relocation, and funding any future vessel if needed.
- Ralph Steele – Asked how federal ferry funds received in 2024 and 2025 were used, and Laura suggested it was used as necessary since the county with struggling with having enough in the Road Fund.

CLOSING REMARKS

WCFAC Tom Philpot:

- Next Meeting – April 2, 2026 at 6:00PM at The Gathering Place, 3913 Legoe Bay Rd.
- New Ferry Talking Points – A list of the rationale supporting a ferry taxing district needed to “match” the federal funds available only through the next few months is available and attached.

Meeting adjourned 7:37 PM

Submitted by R. Blake, Secretary

Attachment: New Ferry Talking Points

Once in a lifetime need. A new ferry is indeed a big cost compared to other PWD projects, but it is no different in character than the county's (legal) obligation to maintain other parts of the county's roads and bridges network, except for one thing: A new ferry is required only once every 60 years. A new ferry won't be required again until 2086. This is literally a once-in-a-lifetime need.

Rescue the Road Fund. The Road Fund is chronically short of funds, which means PWD must cut, scrimp or defer critical projects to maintain and rebuild roads and bridges all over the county. A ferry district would relieve the pressure on the Road Fund by removing the ferry capital expenses, currently at%. People would quickly notice and applaud the higher standards of the roads and that fewer of their tax dollars were needed for the thus- liberated Road Fund. Let's rescue the Road Fund.

Costs less than one bag of groceries. The ferry taxing district would apply a low rate to a large number—the total assessed value of property in Whatcom County. It could meet the needs of financing the new ferry with a rate of 10 cents (?) per \$1,000 of assessed value— \$50 on a \$500,000 house. This is just \$50 dollars, once a year; less than a bag of groceries...

Ferry service doesn't just benefit Island residents. People who live in Whatcom county's cities come to Lummi Island to hike, bike, eat at restaurants and enjoy the island beaches. And many companies in Ferndale and Bellingham do business there. But these Ferry users are exempt from the property tax that finances the Road Fund and helps pay the true cost of the ferry. The countywide ferry taxing district would remove this inequity. Everyone would pay. In 2022 70% of houses on Lummi Island were owned by Whatcom County residents and 18 percent were owned by Whatcom County residents who reside elsewhere in the county.

Save the funding already in hand. Council needs to approve the ferry taxing district by June (?) to complete the funding package for the replacement ferry before the \$25 million Federal grant funding expires in August. So far as is known, if Whatcom County loses the Federal grant, there is no "Plan B" for funding a replacement ferry. The Whatcom Chief is now 64 years old. With each passing year the chances increase exponentially that the ferry will irretrievably falter and fail. Since 2001 the County has worked to get the Federal grant; what a shame to lose it after five years of effort.

Help keep property taxes low. If for whatever reason Whatcom County has to terminate public motor vehicle ferry service to Lummi Island, property values would plummet and tax revenues from Lummi Island to the county treasury would tank. This would represent a loss of \$..... in property tax revenue each year going forward. There is no easy way for the county to replace this lost revenue except by raising property taxes, putting further pressure on affordability countywide.

Not unlike flood control assessments- which benefit specific portions of Whatcom County but are *supported by all County residents*. The Ferry taxing district would support the Whatcom County Ferry system and free up needed Road System Funds

currently used for the Ferry System, to now be used for the repair and maintenance of Whatcom County roads and bridges as they were intended.

And finally, from James Madison. A majority of citizens, Madison says, may “sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens.” Representative institutions (like our County Council) should act as a thoughtful and creative buffer, thus “.it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves.” (Federalist Papers, No. 10, November 22, 1787) Now that the state legislature has given our Council members this taxing opportunity, all of us, Lummi Islanders and Mainlanders alike, should look to them to listen to their inner “public voice,” and approve a fair and durable solution to funding the replacement ferry for the Whatcom County Ferry system.