

Whatcom County Ferry Advisory Committee (WCFAC)

January 28, 2026 Minutes

CALL TO ORDER by Pam Gould at 6:10 PM

Present: Rhayma Blake, Janice Catrell, Terry Diffley, Pam Gould, Thomas Philpot, Markis Dee Stidham, Steve Thomas, Tess Winds-Johnson

Chair-Pam Gould welcomed the board members, Whatcom County Council Member at-Large Position B Jon Scanlon; Whatcom County Public Works Deputy Director Laura Frolich, and attendees.

Pledge of Allegiance and moment of silence.

BUSINESS MEETING

Agenda - Accepted as presented

Minutes, November 19, 2025 Meeting – Adopted at presented.

Updates:

- Jon Scanlon
 - WCFAC Members – Thanked the new WCFAC members for stepping up and also the others who had volunteered to serve.
 - Zoning Change – Highlighted the County Council’s passage of the zone scrub needed to properly authorize kitchen usage at The Gathering Place on Lummi Island at their January 27th meeting.
 - County Council Support – Encouraged WCFAC to invite other County Council members to attend some of our meetings to help familiarize themselves with ferry issues. Pam suggested inviting Boyle and Reinstra in particular.
 - Countywide Ferry Taxing District – Has started advocating for this with other Council members.
 - Additional State Funding - State Senator Shewmake is supporting SB2539 and Representatives Timmons, Ramel, and Lekanoff are supporting HB 2588 which would authorize adding “vehicles” to the legislation that would allow ferry funding through local property taxes and bonds. Be sure to thank them for their support.
- Laura Frolich
 - New Replacement Ferry – Shared that work towards the new ferry will require secure financing, including an established ferry district. The consultants will detail progress towards the final design at either the February or March WCFAC meetings. In answer to David Kershner’s question, it will be a custom build by Elliott Bay Design. The subcontractor for the batteries has not been determined.

In answer to Pam and Markis's questions, it will still look similar to the Sanpoil ferry. Also, our ridership numbers have remained stable over the past three years.

- Dry Dock - Public Works will review 2 bids for dry dock in February and announce the 21-day dry dock outage dates as the bid is finalized. It should be at least 21 days, sometime between 4/11/26 and 5/16/26. The county has retired the vans and will no longer be offering van shuttle service. Mary Ross expressed disappointment.
- Public Disclosure Requests - One-third of the last 200 public disclosure requests received by the county were ferry related so they will be publishing more ferry information on the county website.
- Accident Claims - New protocols in place halved the number of accident claims on the ferry last year.
- 2025 Financial Summary - Will be available in March. Flooding has affected the county road budget line this year.
- 2025 Ridership - In answer to Mary Ross's question, should be available by 2/6/26.
- Crew Contract - In answer to Pam's question, negotiations with the crew continue. The 3-year contract should be agreed upon by the end of 1Q26. Laura does not anticipate a schedule change in 2026.
- Pam Gould
 - Next Steps - Pam shared the "What's Next 2026" presentation (attached) with attendees as she terms off WCFAC. It was noted that the final vessel bid deadline is now fall 2026, not February 2026. Other key dates this year include:
 - Jan. 12-Mar. 13 – State RCW change to allow for a ferry taxing district.
 - Aug. 1 – Deadline for new tax district levy filing. County Council is also considering a sales tax and bonds, but has multiple considerations including sheriff's office, more public defenders, and the jail bond.
 - Plan B - If the taxing district effort is not successful, the new vessel project will be scaled down. The Whatcom Chief is still viable. Jon commented that Jill Boudreau did leave some suggested contingency plans. Laura shared that the state has been reducing what has already been awarded due to tight budgets.

Updates:

- Service Alternatives Planning Work Group (formerly the Island Access Subcommittee) – Plans for necessary terminal improvements call for passenger only ferry service for 3 months between August and October in 2028. Public Works has asked this Island Access Committee to identify needs to be addressed during this outage and report monthly to WCFAC. **Pam Gould, Markis Dee Stidham, Steve Thomas, and Tess Winds-Johnson** all self-nominated. It was noted that **Kurt Esvelt** had also expressed a desire to be involved. **Markis moved and Tom seconded a motion that all be accepted. Passed unanimously.**
- WA Legislature RCW 36.54 Amendment – House Bill 2588 Concerning county ferry district authority and Senate Bill 5839 Concerning county ferry district authority, continue to move through the legislative process.

New Business:

- Nomination of 2026 WCFAC Officers
Tom Philpot - Chair Nominated by Tess. Seconded by Markis.
Terry Diffley - Vice Chair Nominated by Tom. Seconded by Tess.
Rhayma Blake - Secretary Nominated by Pam. Seconded by Steve.
All passed unanimously.
- 2026 WCFAC Meeting Dates
Markis moved and Tess seconded a motion to **continue to meet on the 4th Wednesday of the month, 6:00-7:45pm**. Laura will confirm that the Garden Level Public Works Conference Room is available for the March and October meetings to be held in Bellingham.

Open Session:

Steve Thomas – Inquired about the size of the new ferry and the number of lanes. Laura shared that the final design is not yet available.

Scott Josiah – A county taxing district sounds essential for ferry funding. Can more about this be shared with Islanders? Jon is working on this issue and Laura will post updates on the county website.

Barbara King – Asked when the taxing district issue would be expected to be part of the County Council agenda. Jon guessed it would be 2Q in conjunction with finalizing the financial plan to meet the federal grant requirements.

Wendi Merritt – Thanked all the WCFAC applicants who offered to serve. Also asked: 1) How long the Fall 2027 outage is expected to run. Laura said a week or less. 2) The 2018 Level of Service (LOS) suggested a larger vessel is needed. Laura said ferry usage decreased during and after COVID and the current design meets the 2.5 boat wait criteria. Pam added that the new design should handle a few more cars than the Whatcom Chief.

Jo Philpot – Asked whether the hull design of the new ferry will handle a trip to Bellingham. Laura confirmed that it would and also the necessary trips to drydock boatyards.

Tom Philpot – Reminded attendees that WCFAC's purpose is to review and make recommendations to the Whatcom County Council and the Executive on issues that affect the ongoing operations and infrastructure of ferry service to Lummi Island.

Susan Hutton – Asked if WCFAC meetings might be held later in the date to accommodate more workers. Being able to join meetings via Zoom would be helpful. Tom agreed, but said to date, WCFAC has not been able to identify the volunteer equipment operator that would be needed. Laura indicated the data security issues and data storage requirements involved are also an obstacle. Perhaps an audio recording could be made and shared.

Pam Gould – Asked if a fare adjustment was anticipated later this year. Laura said one is not anticipated this year, but there are always unanticipated costs and events. The county works on a biennium budget.

Steve Dupont – Asked why the lead time for dry dock planning is so short. Major maintenance is usually planned 6-12 months in advance. Pam agreed that this makes planning medical surgeries and required physical therapy difficult. Laura said that even though it is a 2-year budget, expenditures are typically authorized annually. Pam suggested dry dock happen during the upcoming dock construction in Fall 2027.

Dry dock used to start the Wednesday after Labor Day. Could we return to that schedule. Laura wondered whether the schedule might have been changed to spring for calmer weather for the passenger ferry, but said she would explore that option further with the shipyard.

Tom thanked Pam for her service on WCFAC, and also Carol Landt and Catherine Shornick.

Meeting adjourned 7:35 PM

Attachments:

WCFAC November 19, 2025 Minutes - Approved

Submitted by R. Blake-Secretary

Whatcom County Ferry Advisory Committee (WCFAC)

November 19, 2025

Minutes

CALL TO ORDER by Pam Gould at 6:03 PM

Present: Rhayma Blake, Pam Gould, Carol Landt, Thomas Philpot, Catherine Shornick, Markis Dee Stidham

President Pam Gould welcomed the board members, Whatcom County Council Member at-Large Position B Jon Scanlon; and attendees.

Pledge of Allegiance and moment of silence.

BUSINESS MEETING

Agenda - Accepted as presented

Minutes, October 22, 2025 Meeting – Adopted as presented.

Updates:

- Jon Scanlon
 - County Budget - Whatcom County Council has reviewed its budget at the one-year mark in this two-year budget cycle. Public Works, which manages the ferry, reports that it is facing budget shortfalls due to inflation and labor cost increases. Therefore, they are cutting staff and delaying some road improvements. Jon noted that Council has also added \$500,000 to the \$3 million it has already allocated to support the Food Bank and help address current needs. Council will take final action on its budget at its December 2nd meeting.
 - Zoning - A hearing at the Whatcom County Planning Commission on December 11 will address the zone scrub needed to properly authorize kitchen usage at The Gathering Place on Lummi Island. This would then be addressed by Council next January.
 - Climate Resilience - The county's 20-Year Plan is being reviewed in light of the effects of sea level rise and the need to add berms or help people move, especially in county coastal areas.

Old Business:

- RAISE Grant Update – Pam confirmed the RAISE grant application for the smaller 20-car design and dock improvements has been approved. Updates, including a graphic of the replacement ferry vessel, are now available at <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/3432/New-Ferry-Vessel>. A permanent passenger gangway will be included on the island side.
- Extended Ferry Outage Needs Priorities - Plans for necessary terminal improvements call for passenger only ferry service for 3 months between August and October in 2028. Public Works has asked the Island Access Committee to identify needs to be addressed during this outage. It was confirmed that at least one WCFAC member should be part of this committee. Pam has offered to be on the committee but will not be on WCFAC next year. To date, an ADA accessible passenger vessel and possible barge options for supplies, etc. have been identified. Tess stressed the need to increase the availability of free parking on the mainland during the outage. Carol suggested using the current ferry waiting lane along Lummi View Drive. Markis and Carol suggested that listening sessions might be helpful in identifying additional issues and needs to address during the outage.
- WA Legislature RCW 36.54 Amendment –
 - The County Executive’s office has drafted a proposed change in the state statute that provides ferry funding from **property taxes**. The proposal would assess properties countywide, not just property in unincorporated Whatcom County. Such a change would probably lower the burden on those currently paying for the ferry as part of their property taxes. It would also benefit the funding for county road improvements since much of that funding currently goes to ferry maintenance. Jon has already started sharing with our state representatives the need for this change which must be made in the upcoming January 2026 state legislative session. He shared that he and County Council members Galloway and Buchannan were working with other counties to create a County Ferries Caucus to address ferry funding issues at the state and federal level. Pam will publicize when it is appropriate to start contacting our state representatives once there is a bill number. This additional funding is needed as part of the \$25 million match required to secure the \$25 million federal RAISE grant.
 - Pam shared that she, Markis, Carol, and Janice had met with Elizabeth Boyle representing Whatcom County District 2 and Jessica Rienstra representing District 3 on next year’s County Council and briefed them on this need to fast track new ferry funding.

- Upcoming WCFAC Open Positions – Pam’s, Catherine’s, and Carol’s terms are ending. So, there will be 2 on-island and 2 off-island positions open. Pam stressed the importance of having a strong committee in the next several years and that to be appointed one should not only apply online at <https://wa-whatcomcounty.civicplus.com/521/Whatcom-County-Ferry-Advisory-Committee> but be present at the January 13th County Council meeting to be appointed.

New Business:

- Upcoming WCFAC Meeting Dates – **Catherine moved and Carol seconded a motion that WCFAC not meet in December due to the holidays and no urgent issues. Passed unanimously.**
- WCFAC Meeting Opening – Pam shared that it has been suggested that **WCFAC add an additional statement to its meeting opening: “We gratefully acknowledge that we gather on the ancestral homelands of the Lummi Nation of the Coast Salish language group who have stewarded this land since time immemorial and we commit to the ongoing care of our shared land and relationships with this indigenous people.” Catherine suggested that this is appropriate. Markis moved and Tom seconded a motion to approve. Passed unanimously.**

Open Session:

Stuart Rich – Inquired about the timeline for bids on the new ferry. Jon will confirm the latest, but thought it was February 2026 for the vessel and October 2026 for the terminal work.

Bob Anderson – Thanked Pam for her grasp of the issues involved. But he called out the recent ferry rate increase and its significant impact on the island this year and the year ahead. He pointed to the impact of the fare increase on people like Mary Ross, who shared the toll it took as she took her husband to town for physical therapy twice a week. As well as the impact on health care providers who used to come to the island but now find it increasingly unaffordable. Bob is exploring the possibility of health care providers walking on the ferry, but then getting to clients with the proper equipment is a challenge. There are many for sale signs with people having to move to the mainland for jobs and services. If the school has to close, the island could become a retirement community. “The fare increase blew the lid off island economic viability.”

Pam Gould - Warned about the possibility of additional ferry fare surcharges being considered in the future to fund “the next” ferry if the county considers using the current surcharge to help service the debt on this current funding plan.

Stuart Rich – Inquired whether bonds could not be considered as part of the funding package. Jon shared that currently bonding efforts are focused on funding the new county jail which will be determined 1Q26. Also, the final bid for new vessel construction has yet to be determined. He also shared that the border situation has had a detrimental effect on current sales tax revenues affecting county revenues available.

Charles Bailey – Asked what has become of the idea of a Lummi Island taxing district to fund the new ferry. Pam shared that that suggestion has been tabled in favor of a county-wide 1 cent per thousand property evaluation tax which would raise more funds. And Islanders could not be double taxed for the same project.

Loren Conroy – Asked if there could be flexibility in the dates of the ferry outage discussed earlier to take into account possible work needed on the Scenic Estates water system. Markis shared that the fishing season is probably constraining the outage to these currently planned dates.

Pam shared that she will post invitations island wide to participate in the Lummi Island Access Group's work in the coming year.

Meeting adjourned 7:29 PM

Attachments:

WCFAC October 22, 2025 Minutes - Approved

Submitted by R. Blake

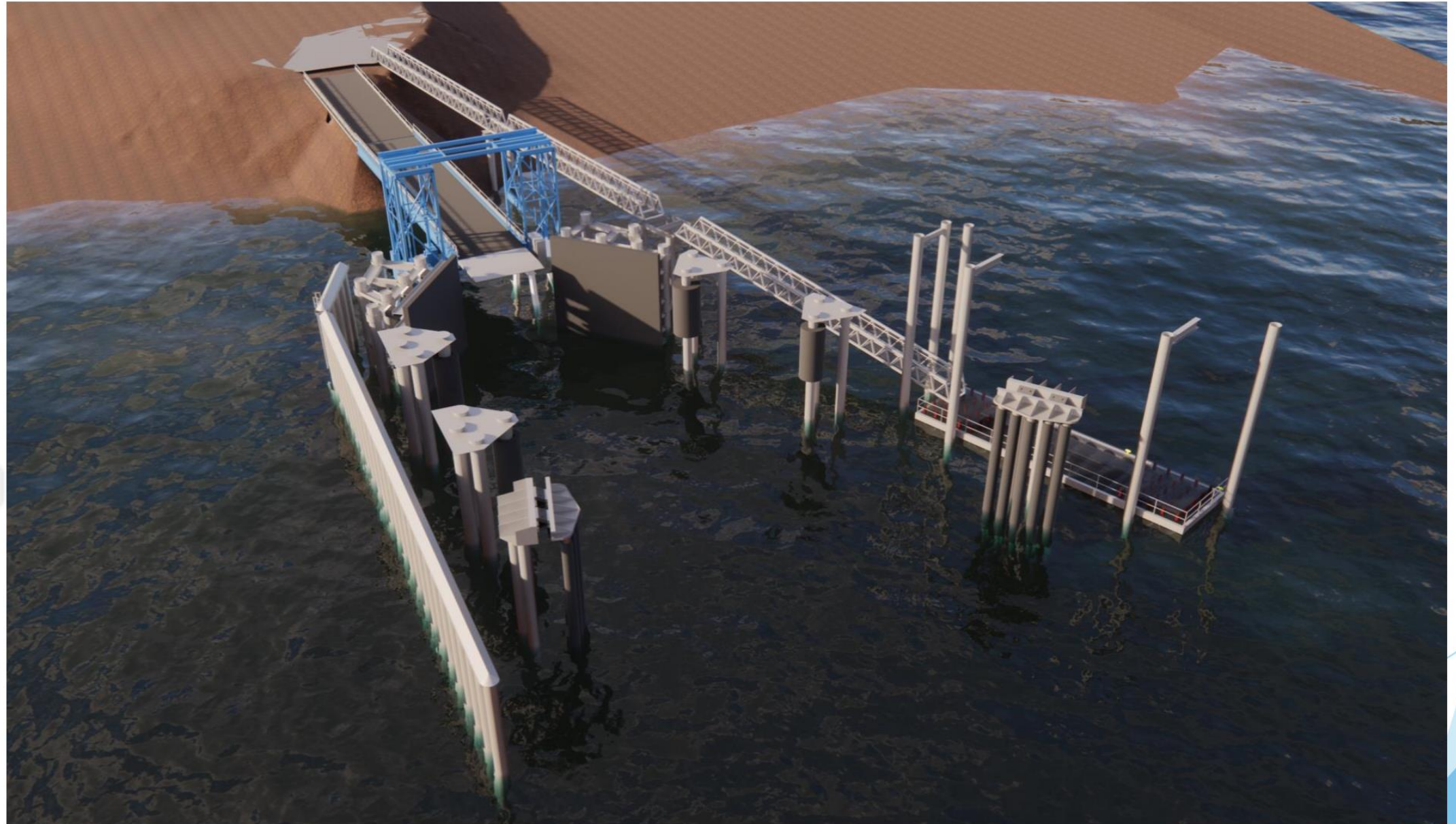
Whatcom County Ferry System- 2026

What's coming Next....

Project Schedule

- January 2025 – January 2026: Complete NEPA environmental assessment!!
 - July 2026: Grant agreement approved by County Council
 - **September 2026: Grant obligation deadline**
 - July 2027 - February 2029: Terminal construction (planned in two seasons)
 - *Season 1 (2027/2028): Limited short vehicle ferry service outages*
 - *Season 2 (2028/2029): Estimated 12 weeks vehicle service outages, around August to October 2028*
- Project team to continue exploring options to minimize vehicle service outage***
- Early 2029: New vessel delivery**

Completed Island Terminal



Current permit status for the ferry terminal work and the MARAD RAISE grant:

- The draft NEPA EA was sent to the federal permit agencies on November 12, 2025 and received comments 1/22/26 from MARAD. We will edit the EA to address the comments
- The Corps of Engineers has begun their NEPA process. We expect their signature March or April
- The Biological opinion is now at the “top of the review stack” with NMFS. We expect a sign off February or March
- Archaeological and Cultural Resources reviews are complete, as well as our negotiation with the Lummi Nation for marine work mitigation. item with the County Council for approval.

Expect to have a draft grant agreement from MARAD by June. As soon as we have the agreement, we will schedule an agenda item with the County Council for approval.

JAN. 12- MAR. 13
Legislative
Session



OCT:
Bid terminal
work

DEC: Award
bid for
terminal work

2026

Financing

FEB:
Bid
vessel

APRIL:
Ferry district
decision
Order vessel

AUG 1:
Deadline
for new
district
levy filing