

Whatcom County Ferry Advisory Committee Meeting (WCFAC)

February 25, 2026 Minutes

Call to Order by Tom Philpot at 6:05 PM

Present: 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 Public Works Director Laura Frolich; Ferry Master Gary Poole; Guest Speaker Atul Deshmane; and attendees.

Pledge of Allegiance; Land Acknowledgment; and Moment of Silence

BUSINESS MEETING

Agenda - Accepted as presented.

Minutes January 28 Meeting - Accepted as presented.

March WCFAC Meeting – March 25, 2026 6:00 PM changed to the Gathering Place on Lummi Island, with KPFF in attendance.

6:15 UPDATES:

County Council Member Ben Elenbaas:

- Council Business - Dominated by Comprehensive Plan; Challenges to Birch Bay and Blaine Growth Plans; 0.1% sales tax for public safety
- Ferry Tax District - Many calls and upcoming meetings about possible new Ferry Tax District; feels it would be better if voting decision was made by popular vote, not just Council vote; sees pros and cons for both Rural and City Incorporated voters.
- Water Adjudication - Commented generally on the ‘tangled web’ of the process with various water rights groups and the Dept. Of Ecology.

Ferry Master Gary Poole:

- Dry Dock - Last day of service Fri, April 17 till midnight; no runs on Sat, April 18 until floats are in place; Sunday, April 19, short ferry outage to place pedestrian ramps.
- Ferry Return - Sat. May 9, short outage of passenger boat to pull pedestrian ramps; Anticipated full ferry service early Sunday, May 10.
- Annual Ferry Maintenance - To be done at Lake Union Shipyard, with a lower than expected bid.

- Island Van Service During Drydock – Not provided by the county this year; suggested islanders approach WTA, and that Guemes Island has used Skagit Transit for their ferry outages.
- Island Parking Lot – The lot across the street from the ferry will be cleared out before drydock, and after drydock, parts of that lot will be blocked off to discourage the long term parking of unused rigs.
- Wooden Dolphins - Described the worn conditions of the two wooden dolphins on the island side, and the vulnerability of the dolphins if the ferry is being moored in there during high winds. There is a possibility that there will be some ferry disruptions if the winds are too high, because the ferry can't stay in the slip. Riders are encouraged to sign up with "Newsflash" through the Public Works website for timely updates.

Public Works Director Laura Frolich:

- Ferry Financing - The goal is to set up a 50 yr plan to provide service; they are currently adjusting variables to suggest the levy proposal for a Ferry Taxing District.
- Community Engagement Plan – Public Works is developing a plan with KPFF.
- Ferry Pass Exchange Mistakes - Noted that mistakes with ferry pass exchanges may lead to the county seeking re-payment if riders were undercharged; or county payments back to riders if they were overcharged.
- 2025 Ferry Financial Statement - Anticipates statement to be available for public viewing during the second quarter of 2026.
- Recent Fare Box Revenue - Can see that the most recent ferry fare increases covered expenses for the decrease in ferry ridership in the 4th quarter of 2025, though there were some unplanned costs because of breakages and repairs.
- Ferry Tax District - Her opinion is that if the Ferry Tax District is not approved, the county will forego the \$25 million RAISE grant for the new ferry. Without a new taxing district, the new ferry financing plan is likely inadequate.
- No New Ferry in 2017 - She recalled that in 2017, the county similarly decided against accepting the Tiger Grant, which was initially rewarded to help fund a new ferry.

UPDATES:

Service Alternatives Planning Work Group: Added Markis Dee Stidham to list of posted members, Steven Thomas, Tess Winds-Johnson, Wendi Merritt, Pam Gould, Kurt Esveldt.

- Request for monthly reports from this committee to WCFAC monthly meetings.
- Service Alternatives Planning Work Group has had one meeting thus far:

- Pam Gould: Identified 2 main areas of concern for upcoming 12-week lengthy outage: Sanitation and Fuel. Even the Fire Dept does not have adequate fuel storage to meet their anticipated needs, and the outage is during high-risk fire season. Not sure if there is an adequate landing site / barge service to re-supply the island.
- Various comments/suggestions made at this WCFAC meeting: Anacortes barges have experience delivering to islands; May be possible to stockpile fuel in rented containers on island; County may be asked to assist in mitigating challenges.

Guest Speaker Atul Deshmane:

- Background and interest in Clean Transportation.
- Suggesting an electric bus infrastructure to transport more people, and less cars back and forth to mainland.
- Could be separate buses on island, and mainland, OR a bus that would loop the island, cross the ferry, and proceed to town (to bus stop, and/or park n rides), to limit the amount of getting on and off for passengers.

Open Session:

Bob Anderson - Cited detailed ferry accounting spreadsheet (courtesy of Ralph Steele) showing sizeable budget surpluses projected for 2025 and 2026, suggesting that the recent fare increase was very excessive. Asked that Public Works should take this evidence seriously. Also suggested that the county should pick up some of the costs associated with the 12-week outage.

Laura Frolich response - The county is coming up with a plan detailing the county obligations and island obligations for the 12-week ferry outage. She also stated that it is not in the county mandate to review or validate reports made by non-county employees.

Tom Philpot - Asked about the recent Consent Agreement to accept \$3.5 million that the council voted to approve by a 7-0 vote. Laura F. explained it was a technicality to get actual payment for the money from the state to help pay the KPFF consultants' fee for the pre-engineering requirements for the RAISE Grant.

Tom Philpot - Expressed the importance of the county hearing what this committee and islanders are saying.

Ben Elenbaas Response - Citizen's research and documentation (such as Ralph Steele's recent spreadsheet) could also be submitted to the Council, as the Charter Review Committee has granted the council the ability to audit.

Terry Diffley - Requested that time is made for deeper explanation of the 2025 Ferry Financial Report, asking the county to describe the details of the line by line accounting of costs, etc.

Laura Frolich Response - It's a good idea, and that can be done. Public Works' intention is to be transparent with data. But, the county does have very specific codes that they must follow in their accounting practices. Further, she is confident that complex calculation systems are effectively utilized by the Finance Data Management Team in the county.

Tom Philpot – Questioned, and suggested careful review of some expenses charged to the fare box, such as the current frequency of dock inspections.

Bob Anderson - Thanked Ben Elenbaas for his attendance, and appreciated his experience and perspective, and asked for his support for approving the new Ferry Taxing District. He further asked what our island community can do to reduce ferry costs, and recalled some islanders questioning the value of continuing the van service during drydock, because few people have utilized it.

Laura Frolich Response – The county was thankful for that suggestion, and that there will be savings of \$20,000 by not having van service. It's impracticable to maintain a van asset owned by the county for 3 weeks of use per year.

Bob Anderson – Asked if reduced ferry labor costs will occur if there is no van service.

Gary Poole Response – There will be a full 3-person deckhand crew for the passenger boat crew during drydock, partly for contractual reasons, and partly to deal with the huge amount of Amazon, FedEx, etc deliveries that require help to get across to the island in an efficient way.

Bob Anderson - Expressed the view that the current ferry funding problem is partly because the county road fund has been underfunded for many years, with no increase in Road Fund Taxes.

Ben Elenbaas Response – He has heard many property tax complaints. Voters realize that WA State taxpayers pay the 6th highest tax rate in our country, and the 3rd highest gas tax. The average voter cares about the total tax money taken out of their pocket, not so much to what fund the tax money goes to.

Tom Philpot thanked all attendees.

Meeting adjourned 7:40 PM

Cumulative Farebox 2024, 2025 Guess and 2026 projection with 88.5 % and 26%

	2024	2025	2025	88.5 % increase	26% increase	
		Guess	Guess	2026	2026	
				Projection	26% increase	
				10% rider decrease	riderhip stable	
Fares	\$ 1,596,702	\$ 1,530,000	\$ 1,530,000	\$ 1,350,000	\$ 1,530,000	
August 23- December 31, 2025		\$ 400,000	\$ 400,000	\$ 1,215,000	\$ 397,800	26%
RAP CAPA youth	\$ 45,000	\$ 68,500	\$ 68,500	\$ 60,000	\$ 60,000	
One time ARPA	\$ 358,000	\$ -	\$ -			
Dolphin adjustment			\$ 430,058			
Fares	\$ 1,999,702	\$ 1,998,500	\$ 2,428,558	\$ 2,625,000	\$ 1,987,800	
MVF (Attrib) 2024 wrong	\$ 133,392	\$ 330,000	\$ 330,000	\$ 330,000	\$ 330,000	
MVFT One time		\$ 281,000	\$ 281,000			
FDR	\$ 282,883	\$ 463,913	\$ 463,913	\$ 450,000	\$ 450,000	
Road Fund 45%	\$ 1,623,490	\$ 1,159,498	\$ 1,511,364	\$ 1,540,125	\$ 1,540,125	
Other income	\$ 34,349	\$ 47,500	\$ 47,500	\$ 47,500	\$ 47,500	
REVENUE	\$ 4,073,816	\$ 4,280,411	\$ 5,062,335	\$ 4,992,625	\$ 4,355,425	
Operation Costs	\$ 4,058,379	\$ 4,200,000	\$ 4,200,000	\$ 4,250,000	\$ 4,250,000	
Dolphin adjustment		-\$ 781,924	\$ -		\$ -	
		\$ 3,418,076	\$ 4,200,000		\$ 4,250,000	
NET FERRY FUND Surplus (Deficit)	\$ 15,437	\$ 862,335	\$ 862,335	\$ 742,625	\$ 105,425	
ATOE	\$ 3,607,755	\$ 2,576,663	\$ 3,358,587	\$ 3,422,500	\$ 3,422,500	
Goal	\$ 1,984,265	\$ 1,879,942	\$ 2,310,000	\$ 1,882,375	\$ 1,882,375	
Farebox Surplus (Deficit)	\$ 15,437	\$ 862,335	\$ 862,335	\$ 742,625	\$ 105,425	
Cumulative Farebox	\$ 291,621	\$ 1,153,956	\$ 1,153,956	\$ 1,896,581	\$ 1,259,381	
Dolphin adjustment	\$ 430,058		-\$ 430,058			
Reported: wrong	\$ 721,679					
MVFT One time			-\$ 281,000			
Prior to one time revenue 2025			\$ 151,277	\$ 742,625		
				Excess Revenue		