

Eliminating the Emergency Ferry runs On Islesboro FAQ

Does Maine DOT really plan to stop berthing the ferry on Islands at night?

- “The Maine DOT’s draft August 8, 2024 Strategic Update and Emphasis Areas ¹ “is to berth virtually the entire Maine State Ferry Service (MSFS) fleet on the mainland rather than on the islands. Emergency plans have not been finalized and more work is required on this topic. Island residents may be required to call USCG/Life Flight or use another non MSFS vessel for transportation.”² This would be a dramatic departure from the docking of the Islesboro ferry, which has been berthed overnight on the island since approximately 1959.

Why is that a problem? Why is it Important to Have a Ferry on Islands for Emergency Transport?

- The printed tariff which governs the rights and obligations of the MSFS and its users has acknowledged for years that the MSFS will provide Islesboro, and other islands, with emergency service when necessary. Islesboro uses the ferry for emergency runs when either Life Flight can’t respond, tides or the weather make loading onto a water taxi impossible, or if Islesboro EMS deem that the patient can only be transported by ambulance, due to serious medical issues.
- The island could require an emergency evacuation of a large numbers of residents due to an uncontrolled wildfire or a serious weather event. There could be mass casualties due to a shooter event.
- The Public Safety officer and Fire Chief warn of dangers they are trained to tackle that would require transport back and forth from the island to the mainland. It is critical in such instances that public safety is able to move folks off the island as quickly as possible. Folks can’t just simply jump in their car and drive to Lincolnville.
- MDOT appears to recognize these health and safety concerns because it included that perspective when applying for Federal Transportation Administration funding. In the 2024 grant application MDOT states that “residents of Frenchboro, Islesboro, Matinicus Isle, North Haven, Swans Island, and Vinalhaven rely on travel by ferry for access to jobs, schools, and goods and services on the mainland, as well as for emergency medical transportation. Affordable, reliable public ferry service facilitates the delivery of goods and services vital to these year-round island communities, including food, fuel, mail, building materials, and emergency supplies³.”

Why are delays a problem? Why not simply wait for the morning ferry for transport of patients?

- Any delays in response to island emergencies could cost lives and it is inevitable that there will be delays if the ferry is not berthed on the island. It was with the intention of ensuring a quick response that the State of Maine, has berthed the ferry on Islesboro since 1959.
- The current system is functioning very well. Currently there are three island residents who crew the ferry. Additionally, there are Able Bodied Seamen housed on the island overnight to make sure

¹ MaineDOT- 2024 Strategic Update and Emphasis Areas, 2024, Section 5(b)(2) Emphasis Areas, Deliver Multimodal Improvements.

² Kersbergen, Mackenzie, MaineDOT Project Manager, letter to the Lincolnville Select Board, dated October 7, 2024, RE: Public Meeting- Lincolnville, WIN 27752.00 Lincolnville Islesboro Ferry Terminal Project.

³ FY 2024 Passenger Ferry Grant Program, Electric and Low-Emitting Ferry Pilot, and Ferry Service for Rural Communities, Maine DOT supplemental grant application to FTA.

<https://www.maine.gov/mdot/grants/ferry/docs/2024/FY24-Passenger-Ferry-Grant-Program-Supplemental-Form.pdf>

there is sufficient crew for regular runs in the morning or in the case of nighttime emergencies. There have been no unnecessary delays using the current system.

Why does moving the ferry to the mainland cause delays?

- The MDOT proposes to move all crew to the mainland and eliminate crew housing on the island. If crews are not housed on Islesboro, they will be living somewhere else on the mainland in which case it is uncertain how long it would take crew to travel from wherever they reside to the ferry in Lincolnville. Then, once the crew, captain and engineer are assembled they can travel to Islesboro for emergency transport.
- Delays in getting to Lincolnville and then over to the island in emergencies are an unacceptable and avoidable cost to island citizens.

How Often Does Islesboro Use the Ferry for Emergency Runs?

- Islesboro EMS and Public Safety have rigorously limited the times the town uses the ferry for emergency runs outside of scheduled runs. Currently the average number of ferry emergency runs is 9 per year or less than one per month. If having ferry emergency transportation available saves only one life it is, arguably, worth maintaining the ferry on the island.

Why does MDOT want to change the current system?

- It is especially troubling that apparently the only reason for this change is to save the cost of housing crews on the islands. Maintaining a crew on the island does require added costs. Crews work one week on and one week off and there is a cost for maintaining the overnight accommodation. But it can be reasonably argued that the total cost for keeping a crew on the island is very low relative to the safety of island residents.

Other costs the state will incur due to berthing the ferry in Lincolnville:

- There will need to be significant costs to redesigning the ferry terminal in Lincolnville to make it safe for berthing, as the Lincolnville pen is more exposed to winds and seas compared to the Islesboro pen.
- The current design for Lincolnville proposes disruption of the Town dock space, reducing space for boats.
- A number of crew (currently 5) live on the island. The MDOT proposal does not discuss the possible impacts to crew who live on Islesboro or for manning the vessels generally.

Has Maine DOT offered any other solution?

- There has been a proposal by a private operator to build a proposed 70 ft. emergency boat to be berthed at Carvers Harbor, Vinalhaven. The current proposal will have the boat serving multiple islands. It is unknown at this time what, if any, Maine DOT and the MSFS role is in regard to this proposal. We have been aware of this proposal and it was reviewed by a town committee which thought, generally, that it could be a good idea for coastal communities but was fairly expensive and probably would not have much impact upon Islesboro given the fact the boat would be in Carvers Harbor (21 miles away) and was pretty expensive (see below).

- The docks at both Islesboro and Lincolnville will need to be upgraded to handle such a large boat and for access by EMS down the ramps.
- The proposed emergency boat in the current iteration is quite expensive. The boat is estimated to cost approximately \$5 million. The yearly operating cost is estimated at \$2.5 million, which will include boat operation, specialized personnel, and housing of the personnel on Vinalhaven.
- In addition to the cost of maintenance of the emergency boat there would be the cost of paying a captain, ABS and Physician's Assistant to be on-call 24/7/365.

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