

Summary of October 2021 Ferry Questionnaire(s)

This project began many months ago. The Maine State Ferry Service Advisory Board formed a Finance Subcommittee approximately a year and a half ago. The Subcommittee members, then and now, consist of Gabe Pendleton and John King of Islesboro and Jon Emerson of North Haven.

The Subcommittee expressed some concerns regarding the MSFS Capital Plan which, at that time, ran only through 2021. The MSFS then provided a revised Capital Plan running through approximately 2028 with specific plans for capital expenditures, including the replacement of the Margaret Chase Smith, which is about to have her 35th birthday,. The completion date for the replacement was initially targeted for 2028, which, in the estimation of the Subcommittee, was very far in the future and was rather optimistic to begin with.

In anticipation of the passage of federal infrastructure legislation, the Finance Subcommittee proposed that the full Advisory Board recommend to the MSFS that the “new” Capital Plan be accelerated so that any vessel replacements (of which there are a number) be “rivet ready” when, and if, the legislation passed. After some delay, the full Board did just that in September, which was gratifying as the infrastructure legislation was just passed and has now been signed into law.

A number of the islands anticipating new vessels, including Islesboro, have consistently expressed an interest in providing the MSFS with input as to what their users would like to see (and not see) in a new vessel. The MSFS indicated they would be willing to come to the island, along with marine architects, to hear input. However, to avoid delay and to speed the process along it was proposed to the Select Board that a questionnaire be sent to all box holders regarding ferry issues. A questionnaire was initiated which became a two part questionnaire, regarding the service in general to establish some baseline criteria (Part 1) and the replacement of the MCS (Part 2). Thanks to all for their help putting the questionnaire together, by the way, in particular Lauren Bruce. The questionnaire was sent to all box holders with the monthly October mailing.

Phil Seymour kindly agreed to help collate the responses which were 85 in number. Phil handled the responses to Part 1 and John King handled the responses to Part 2.

Spreadsheet summaries of the responses are attached. The original responses have been put in a notebook and provided to Janet Anderson for safekeeping and review by anyone so inclined to do so.

Summary of Part 1– Current State of Affairs

As noted above, the first half of the survey was designed to solicit the ferry riders’ opinions of ferry costs, commuter passes, parking, schedules, the Town subsidizing ferry costs & the possibility of establishing passenger ferry service to Belfast. This to our knowledge had never been done before and we thought it helpful to establish something of a base line to begin with.

There were 12 questions in Part 1. Eight of those were graded on a system ranging from the number 1 (terrible) to the number 5 (wonderful). A weighted average was calculated for each question of the 85 returned surveys. A weighted average is calculated by multiplying the percentage for each grade of each question, then summing the products. A final question was a simple yes or no as to what folks thought of the possibility of a high speed passenger boat to Belfast as an option.

Of the 85 responses received 61, or 73% came from full time island residents. Next were 14 responses from seasonal residents and then 8 from part time residents.

In regard to ferry use, 35 respondents (41%) indicated they used the ferry two or more times a month. 26 (31%) reported use once a week. Coming in third were 15 (18%) that used the ferry 2-3 times per week.

As far as individual categories are concerned coming in last at an average of 2.0 were the responses to the question dealing with summer parking at Lincolnville Beach. That was followed closely by people's opinions regarding parking in general at Lincolnville Beach, which was 2.1. Note both questions received a response of 1 from 31 respondents (46%). It should be noted, however, that 18 (27%) of the respondents came in at 3 and another 18 (again 27%) did not respond at all to the question.

Fares did about the same with the summer vehicle rates at 2.1 with most folks at between 1 and 3. Summer walk on rates did about the same at 2.3. Off season rates did a bit better than that with vehicles at 2.7 and walk ons at 2.9. It looks to us as though people are still smarting from Tariff 8 and are not very happy with the current state of affairs, either.

The current schedule did the best, getting a 3.4 with most folks giving a rating of between 3 and 5.

Most people did not think much of the idea of using town funds to subsidize the system with 51% given that idea a 1 (35/51%) or a 2 (8/12%). The average came in at 2.1%.

We also asked about commuter tickets. About half of the respondents (49) knew that that was an option and half (39) did not. Most who commented did not find the current offering attractive.

Finally, we asked about people's thoughts about a high speed passenger boat between Seal Harbor and Belfast. As a side note, after the survey went out we were advised that were that to happen the island departure point would probably have to be Grindle Point, not Seal Harbor. In terms of the trip itself that would not be a huge difference. In any event, 54 (65%) respondents thought that was a good idea and 29 (35%) did not think so.

The general takeaway here we think is that these results would indicate that the overall ridership of the Islesboro ferry system is not very satisfied with the product – particularly in regard to cost and parking in Lincolnville - considering the results of slightly greater than terrible to slightly less than mediocre.

Summary of Part 2 – Input regarding a new vessel

The interpretation of the responses to Part 2 turned out to be more subjective than the Responses to Part 1 and the “counting” was somewhat subjective as well. This arises as the responses were more narrative and contained many likes and dislikes. The numbers may, therefore, be off a little but there were a number of issues, identified below, that showed up in many responses and for which there was, for the most part, general agreement. They are as follows:

- There is a broad consensus that the current three lanes on the MCS don't work well. We received many comments regarding scraped wheels, hitting various boat components, and a general inability to get in and out of vehicles. Indeed the need for a different approach was mentioned more than any other single issue.
- Coming in second was a desire to have an electric boat. There were a few comments regarding hybrids, if electric can't work. There is strong sentiment to be as “clean” as possible.
- There was a general feeling that the next boat should be able to carry more, but not that many more, vehicles. Other than one comment that we should consider a double decker boat, most people seemed to think that some additional capacity would be a good idea.
- Users definitely want better and easier access to passenger cabins and heads. Our sense is that a lot of this springs from the current three lane configuration mentioned above but folks clearly want the ability to get out of cars and be able to access the passenger areas.
- There is general agreement that the future vessel should be double ended. There were a number of comments that backing up to get out of Grindle Point and turning around to get to America uses time, is wasteful, and unnecessary.
- The passenger seating situation is interesting. There is a strong sentiment for deck level seating, although people seem interested in good views while en route as well. Note three votes for an upper level viewing deck, although personnel costs could be an issue there. There were positive comments regarding varied seating, such as provided by Amtrak which allows passengers to face one another.
- Bathrooms are a big issue. There were a lot of negative comments (but one positive one) regarding bathrooms. Most people don't seem to like the current bathrooms at all. They are described as nasty, gross, hot, and generally not very nice. We are not so sure that all of these are warranted as the crew works hard to keep them clean but much attention at the design phase to make them more user friendly would be time well spent. We received other comments regarding gender neutral bathrooms, family bathrooms, and baby changing stations (pro and con). Suffice it to say, attention during the design phase in regard to the bathrooms is certainly warranted.
- Sixteen respondents specifically asked for improved luggage/rolling basket storage, no doubt as the result of more people now walking on the boat as opposed to driving on. Consideration need be given not only to space issues but to protection from the elements, which is currently virtually non-existent.
- There seems to be a general sentiment that the boat should provide WiFi. However, that is not universal. Another thread running through many of the responses is that WiFi (and

electronic charging stations and other amenities) are unnecessary and fancy tack ons which would result in unnecessary additional expense.

- There is a common theme that the new vessel should be, as one respondent put it “Basic-safe-efficient-maintenance friendly-no frills-user friendly.” A number of others commented they would be happy to forgo frills in favor of something affordable. There were a number of responses saying that keeping things simple is preferable in order to keep ticket costs down and fares affordable

It should be noted that not listed on the spreadsheet were a number of comments regarding costs resulting in folks minimizing trips to the mainland as much as possible and the schedule, however, since that was the subject of the first part of the questionnaire as well.

The spreadsheets are attached and items receiving less than five comments are included as well for review. As noted above the original responses are contained in a notebook with Janet Anderson, which can be reviewed by anyone so inclined.