



STATE OF WASHINGTON
— OFFICE OF GOVERNOR JAY INSLEE —

December 20, 2023

San Juan County Council
55 Second Street N
Friday Harbor, WA 98250

Friday Harbor Town Council
60 Second Street S
Friday Harbor, WA 98250

Dear San Juan Councilors Wolf, Fuller, and Minney, Mayor Jackson, and Friday Harbor Councilors:

Thank you for your October letter regarding Washington State Ferries (WSF) service to the San Juan Islands (SJI). We understand the importance of this service, especially to Washingtonians living in island communities. My office, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), and WSF are focused on the recruitment, hiring, and training necessary to increase crewing availability and on building new vessels to increase the size of WSF's fleet.

Even before WSF's current challenges, my budget proposals requested WSF funding at a level meant to avoid its current crewing and vessel issues. I am pleased the legislature has joined me in providing funding for programs to develop new licensed deck and engine room officers (WSF's largest current constraint) and authorizing the building of five new vessels. One successful new program is the Able-bodied seafarer (AB) to Mate program which moves ferry employees more quickly through required training. Due to this initiative, we will fill 30 new mate positions next spring. Without the program, it is likely WSF would have had only six new mates. While these actions will improve WSF's service in the long term, I appreciate your focus on shorter term solutions.

There are several actions we are taking that align with many of the points in your letter:

- **Increase the accessibility for priority medical loading with the islands and to/from Anacortes.**

WSF recognizes the importance of priority medical loading and worked with the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy to develop an updated medical priority loading program. This creative partnership resulted in improvements to the program such as submitting the necessary doctor certification for priority boarding online versus the previous requirement of faxed certification. There may be need for adjustments to the new program and WSF will work with the San Juan Islands Ferry

Advisory Committee to discuss possible changes. No passenger with a physician certified need will be denied preferential boarding.

- **Support the County in establishing a passenger-only ferry service between the islands.**

We want to institute passenger-only ferry service and believe there is a way to do this. To that end, I have requested funding from the legislature to research and report recommendations on increasing ferry capacity through passenger-only ferries throughout Puget Sound starting with the San Juan Islands. Furthermore, I have requested funds be set aside to implement solutions identified for the Interisland route. As you know, almost 20 years ago the state stopped providing passenger-only ferry service. In its place, the legislature authorized counties to create passenger-only ferry districts and financing tools to fund passenger-only ferry service. Kitsap and King County have successfully used that model to develop their passenger-only ferry service. We now have unexpected vessel and crewing challenges that warrant rethinking our passenger-only ferry service. It is time for us to put this option back on the table and I welcome the Council's voice in that discussion.

- **Establish a reliable emergency schedule.**

With input from your community, I am pleased that WSF has developed a service disruption schedule which is particularly important for the Interisland route. As schedule changes occur, WSF must continue to effectively communicate these adjustments to customers. When a schedule change is pending, WSF will provide that information as quickly as possible to assist community members in making alternative plans. Additionally, alongside the San Juan Island Ferry Advisory Council, WSF is exploring the option of expanding the Interisland program to a 7-day a week, year-round service. This option would result in fewer relief needs and thus improve the schedule. I look forward to recommendations on next steps.

- **Provide financial support to San Juan County and the Town of Friday Harbor for data collection and analysis of the impacts of businesses and residents of ferry service disruptions on the Anacortes/San Juan Islands route.**

I have requested funding for Western Washington University to conduct an economic study focused on San Juan County that includes consideration of a variety of factors that affect Friday Harbor's economy, including ferry service. There is widespread awareness of both the importance of WSF's service to the San Juan Islands and the impacts to residents, businesses, and visitors when service is disrupted. Fortunately, with direction from my office and funding already approved by the legislature, WSF service will improve crewing over the coming months. For vessel availability, the new vessel procurement process may result in getting more than one boat constructed at a time.

- **Incentivize residency for WSF crews with the reasonable distance from the Anacortes/San Juan Islands terminals.**

I have requested funding to ensure WSF can continue to contract with a private passenger ferry company to provide ferry service to workers moving throughout the islands. WSF has been creatively approaching the challenge of recruiting and retaining employees to serve the San Juan Island route, especially the Interisland route. WSF incentivizes relief requests for the Interisland route by offering an additional five hours of overtime for those who accept Interisland relief requests. WSF has also contracted with a private Anacortes passenger fast ferry company for getting employees to and from Friday Harbor, increasing the likelihood they will accept San Juan Island/Interisland relief requests. I welcome your engagement in identifying housing solutions that could benefit ferry and other workers in the County.

- **Establish a secondary on-call crew exclusive to the Anacortes/San Juan Islands routes.**

I agree that the ferry system needs redundancy and have requested funding for an additional Able-bodied seafarer and oiler on every vessel in the system. I hope the legislature supports my request for this critical addition to service as it would provide additional staff to each vessel serving the San Juan Islands. This will provide the needed redundancy of staff on each vessel, leading to increased reliability.

- **Develop an Emergency Action Plan with local stakeholders (Town of Friday Harbor, San Juan County, and other local agencies) to mitigate impacts of stranded commuters when vessels are cancelled unexpectedly.**

While stranding passengers is rare, I understand the impact of such events on residents, visitors, and the reputation of the San Juan Islands as a place to visit. The state will work with local stakeholders on how WSF can mitigate the impacts when WSF customers have no way to get to their destination on the same day they expected to travel.

- **Partner with the Northwest Workforce Council, the County's Economic Development Council, local trades programs, and our school districts to promote interest with WSF as a career.**

The WSF Human Resources department has been working with a variety of community organizations and entities in San Juan Island County on recruitment efforts. I have directed WSF to expand that coordination with the local workforce development agencies.

- **Examine the feasibility of increased wages for employees of WSF to be competitive given current workforce shortage conditions.**

Wages for ferry employees increased this biennium with leadership from my office and engagement with our labor partners. Wage rates are evaluated every two years as part of the collective bargaining process. When those conversations next begin, we will work closely with those negotiating to re-evaluate and adjust compensation as necessary. In the meantime, WSF will continue to provide internal and external pathways to critical ferry jobs while expanding recruitment efforts across the state and nationally.

I want to emphasize WSF's efforts to be strategic with our crewing and fleet. In March 2022, as COVID transmission rates decreased and the public began to travel more frequently, WSF released a [Service Restoration Plan](#), prioritizing service based on ridership, the availability of other travel options, and which boats are able to serve which terminals. Appropriately, the San Juan Islands routes were first on that list and while we know every cancelled sailing has a negative impact on WSF's customers, it is important to note those routes have four of the current schedule's 15 vessels (27 percent) and for the last week they achieved 94.6 percent reliability. This is not perfect but is a much more reliable service than the four routes yet to be restored.

In closing, I send my gratitude to the Council for the thoughtful ideas you have shared. By working together, seeking and implementing creative ideas, and supporting further funding and resources for WSF, we will continue to improve service throughout Puget Sound.

Should you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to Debbie Driver, my Senior Policy Advisor for Transportation, at Debbie.Driver@gov.wa.gov or (360) 870-4712.

Very truly yours,



Jay Inslee
Governor

CC: Patty Rubstello, Assistant Secretary, WSDOT Ferries Division
Senator Liz Lovelett, District 40
Representative Debra Lekanoff, District 40
Representative Alex Ramel, District 40
Representative Jake Fey, Chair of House Transportation Committee
Senator Marko Liias, Chair of Senate Transportation Committee
U.S. Senator Patty Murray
U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
U.S. Representative Rick Larsen