



SAN JUAN  
COUNTY'S

# MARINE TRANSPORTATION PILOT PROJECT

FINAL REPORT

January 2026

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>About the Pilot Project</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Timeline</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Services</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Fast Facts by the Numbers</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Daily Usage</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Emergency Usage</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Challenges &amp; Feedback</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Community Survey</b>	<b>10-20</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>21</b>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

Plagued by significant and impactful ferry service disruptions throughout 2023 and 2024, the San Juan County Council requested ‘executive relief’ funding from the WA State Governor’s Office to support a 180-day, County-run marine transportation services pilot project. This request was granted in September of 2024 when Governor Jay Inslee traveled to Friday Harbor to announce a \$1.5 million award from the Department of Commerce’s Emergency Rapid Response (ERR) funding.

San Juan County led a ten-week pilot project from April to June 2025 to provide emergency barge and foot-passenger transportation during Washington State Ferry (WSF) service disruptions, as well as daily travel to and from the mainland (Anacortes). The project served over 2,500 passengers who reported traveling for recreation/leisure, commuting to/from work, and traveling for appointments, including medical needs. Each of these services was provided at no cost to the passengers, subsidized by the County’s award from the ERR funding.

Between the beginning of April and the end of June, the County expended \$656,861.46 of the initial \$850,000.00 made available. Unfortunately, due to State budget challenges, the County was not able to provide a longer pilot program of 180 days total through the end of September.

## Results

During the ten-week pilot, San Juan County generated valuable data and insights on the demand for passenger-only ferry service between the islands and the mainland, as well as the challenges of managing such a service as a local government. A broadly circulated community survey (210 responses) and contractor feedback helped contextualize experience with the pilot project.

Overall, approximately 75% of respondents to the community survey rated favorably their experience with the daily passenger service. In fact, 47% of respondents said they’d be very likely to use daily foot-passenger services in the future, with a majority willing to pay a walk-on fee. Even more support (56%) was shown for establishing emergency marine transportation service during WSF disruptions. If San Juan County were to consider establishing a more permanent foot passenger marine transportation system in the future, 37% of survey respondents noted they’d be very likely to support establishing a transit district via property taxes and willing to pay ridership fees.

Other feedback on the project identified areas for improvement including consistent scheduling coordination, more widespread communication about the availability of emergency transportation services, and the need to secure dock space on Shaw Island.

## Conclusion

San Juan County remains interested in supporting marine transportation alternatives throughout the islands and mainland and continues to explore avenues to expand the network of marine services available to the public to complement the State-managed WSF service.

### Over the course of the pilot project:

#### Daily passenger service to Anacortes:

Operated for 74 days and completed 148 round-trips, providing 2,399 passengers with transportation.

#### Emergency interisland passenger service:

Operated for 9 days and completed 12 round-trips, providing 127 passengers with transportation.

#### Emergency barge service:

Was not called into service but received 4 pre-registrations from local businesses.

# ABOUT THE PILOT PROJECT



## Introduction

San Juan County led a ten-week pilot project to establish marine transportation services throughout the County. These services included emergency barge and foot-passenger transportation during disruptions to Washington State Ferry (WSF) service as well as travel to and from the mainland (Anacortes) on a daily basis. Each of these services was provided at no cost to the passengers, subsidized by the County's emergency funding awarded by the Governor's Office.

## Background

Plagued by ferry service disruptions throughout 2023 and 2024, the County Council issued a request to the Governor's Office for 'executive relief' from ferry service disruptions. Council provided a 180-day proposal for County-run marine transportation services. This request was granted in September when WA State Governor Jay Inslee traveled to Friday Harbor to announce an award of \$1.5 million from the Department of Commerce's Emergency Rapid Response fund, with a contract finalized in November.



County Council with Gov. Inslee, 2024



FAC, County, & Town leadership with Gov. Inslee, 2024

# TIMELINE

## Summer 2024

San Juan County develops and submits a legislative ask to the Governor's Office for foot-passenger marine transit and on call barge services.

## November 12, 2024

San Juan County signs the contract to accept and utilize funds.

## Spring 2025

County executes an interim contract for Emergency Interisland Water Taxi service. Staff review the 11 proposals received for the three pilot projects and present recommendations to the Council. Council then directs staff to execute contracts.

## June 30

Pilot project is complete.

## September 2025

Final report compiled & presented.

## 2023 through mid-2024

San Juan County experiences significant disruptions to Washington State Ferry Services. County staff and elected officials meet with the WA State Governor and WSF staff to discuss possible solutions.

## Early Fall 2024

The Governor authorizes the Emergency Rapid Response funding to be utilized by San Juan County for emergency transportation services.

## Winter 2024/2025

County staff develop and post Requests for Proposals for all three elements of the pilot project. During this time staff develop the Engage Page to compile all press and RFP information and submit all required contract documents to the Department of Commerce.

## April 14 - June 30, 2025

Contracts are completed and services become available the week of April 14, 2025.

## July - August 2025

Data collection period. Follow-up survey is live and County staff work to compile final report.

# SERVICES

## DAILY

### PASSENGER SERVICE TO ANACORTES

Available 7 days per week regardless of WSF ferry cancellations / delays

## EMERGENCY

### INTERISLAND PASSENGER SERVICE

Available during WSF ferry cancellations / delays

## EMERGENCY

### BARGE SERVICE

Available during WSF ferry cancellations for essential service providers



**Daily Passenger Service Between Anacortes and San Juan County** – San Juan Safaris provided seven-day a week, twice daily passenger-only service to Lopez, Orcas, San Juan, and Downtown Anacortes via Cap Sante Marina. With one trip in the morning and another in the evening, this service provided complete, round-trips for passengers.



**Emergency Interisland Passenger Service** – Outer Island Excursions provided emergency passenger-only interisland service when the WSF interisland boat was out-of-service and/or service restoration time was unknown or estimated at greater than four hours. Emergency services began within two hours of the WSF disruption.



**Emergency Barge Service** – Pintail Marine provided emergency on-call barge services for essential service providers between Lopez, Orcas, San Juan, Shaw, and Anacortes if WSF experienced service disruptions for greater than 24 hours or when mainland service reduced to fewer than a 2-boat schedule.

# FAST FACTS BY THE NUMBERS

## DAILY

### PASSENGER SERVICE TO ANACORTES

Operated for 74 days and completed 148 round trips

Provided 2,399 passengers with transportation

## EMERGENCY

### INTERISLAND PASSENGER SERVICE

Operated for 9 days and completed 12 round trips

Provided 127 passengers with transportation

## EMERGENCY

### BARGE SERVICE

Was not called into service

Received 4 pre-registrations from local businesses

## PROJECT FINANCES

The County expended \$656,861.46 of the \$850,000.00 available under the WA State Dept. of Commerce grant.



Daily passenger service, unloading



Council Chair Kari McVeigh with San Juan Safaris staff on inaugural trip

# DAILY USAGE

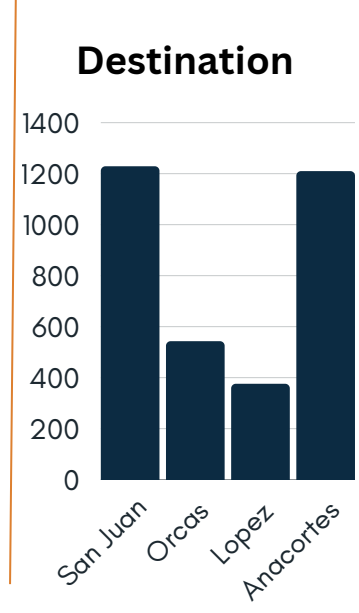
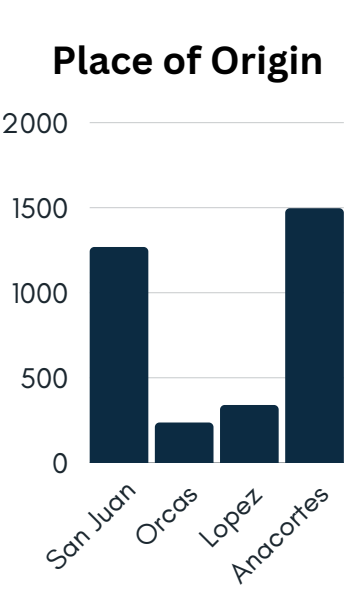
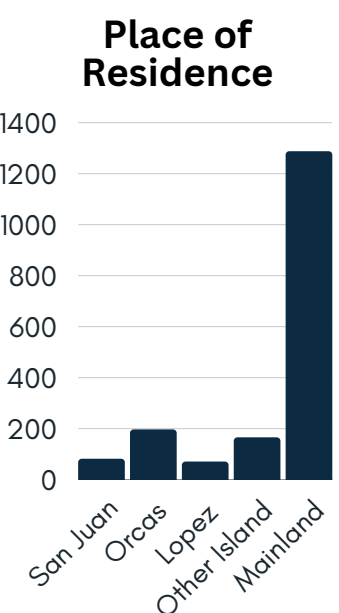
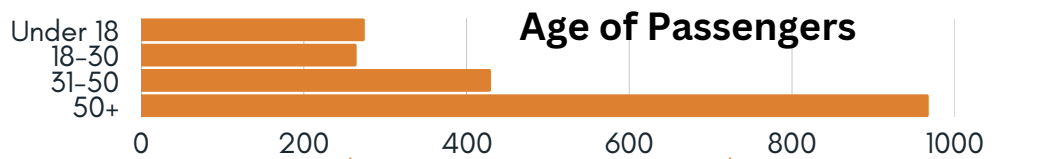
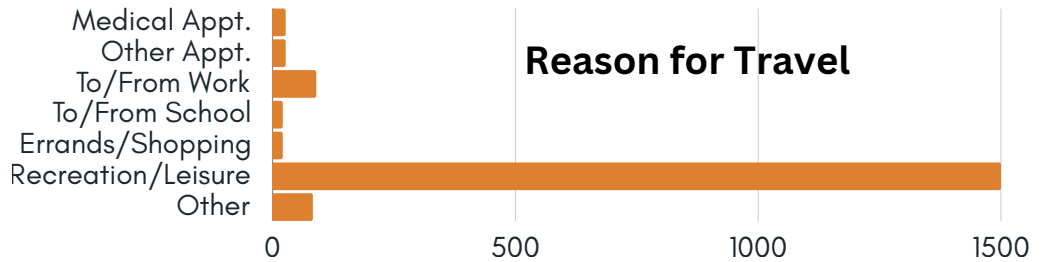
## Passenger Service to Anacortes

San Juan Safaris collected passenger information throughout the 10-week pilot project. The boat made 148 round trips.

Total Passengers			
	One Way	Round Trip	Total
April	179	107	286
May	617	353	970
June	628	515	1,143
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,424</b>	<b>975</b>	<b>2,399</b>

### How did you hear about the service?

- 0.5% County website
- 0.5% News Flashes from County
- 20% Social Media
- 30% Local News Outlet
- 1% San Juan Safaris Website
- 30% Word of Mouth
- 18% Other



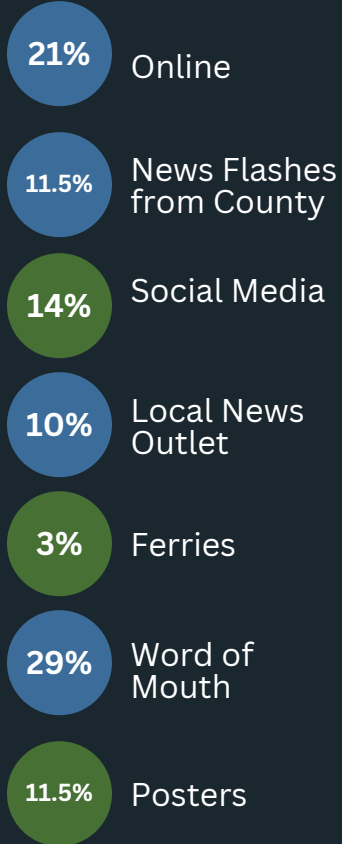
# EMERGENCY USAGE

## Emergency Interisland Service

Outer Island Expeditions collected passenger information throughout the 10-week pilot project. The boat made 12 round trips.

		Arriving Island				Total
		Lopez	Orcas	San Juan	Shaw	
Departing Island	Lopez	0	13	13	0	26
	Orcas	0	0	36	0	36
	San Juan	19	45	0	1	65
Total		19	58	49	1	127

### How did you hear about the service?

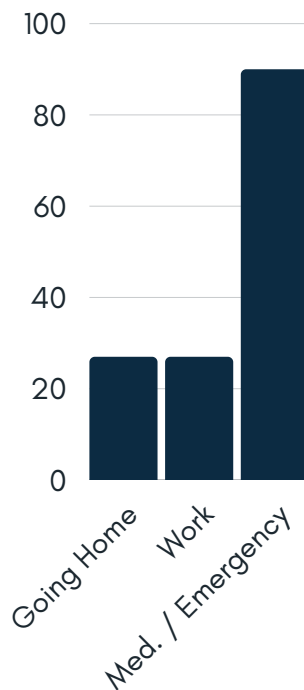


### Age of Passengers

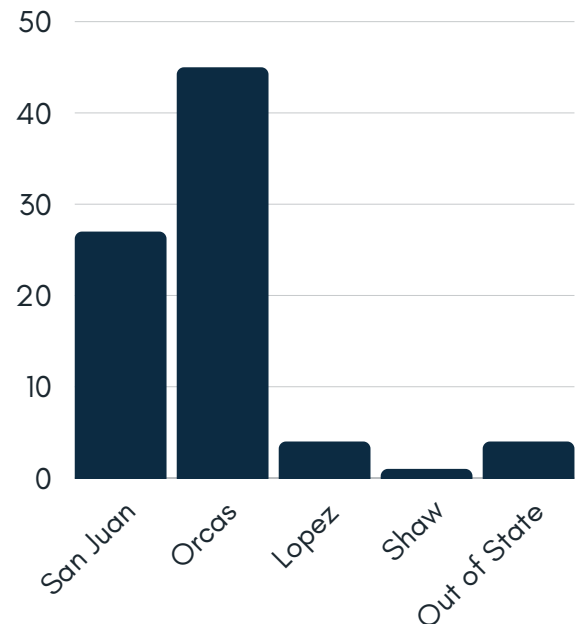


Ages of passengers ranged from 18-76, with an average age of 37.

### Reason for Travel



### Place of Residence



# CHALLENGES & FEEDBACK

## Communications

- Not all WSDOT employees were aware of the Emergency Interisland Passenger Service
- Communications on any given day didn't reach everyone who needed to hear it

## Dock Space

- No public dock on Shaw Island – Unable to serve the island
- Dedicated dock space (100-feet) – Needed to efficiently and effectively load/unload passengers

## Scheduling

- Need for a structured schedule with designated times in the event of a ferry disruption. By having predetermined response time this would make the system more predictable for passengers. For example, instead of "responding within 2 hours," setting a designated response time would give passengers greater ability to plan to use the Emergency Interisland Passenger Service in advance.

## Contractor Feedback

*"We strongly believe that if the county was able to fund a passenger only ferry and dock infrastructure that it would become a service valued by both residents and visitors."*

- San Juan Safaris

*"Thank you for the opportunity to assist our community, it has been an honor to be of service!"*

- Outer Island Excursions

## Future Considerations

*"A future passenger ferry would require a more robust docking facility. Because the Washington State Ferry System already has much infrastructure in place a future passenger ferry dock should be located near existing State Ferry Terminals (parking, services, restrooms, food / grocery, shelter)."*

*"A future vessel would need to operate at a higher passenger count. Additionally, a larger vessel would need to be faster. A more modern, low wake, and efficient vessel traveling 25-35 knots would decrease the travel time by half, making the all-stop one-way trip close to 1.5 hours."*

-San Juan Safaris

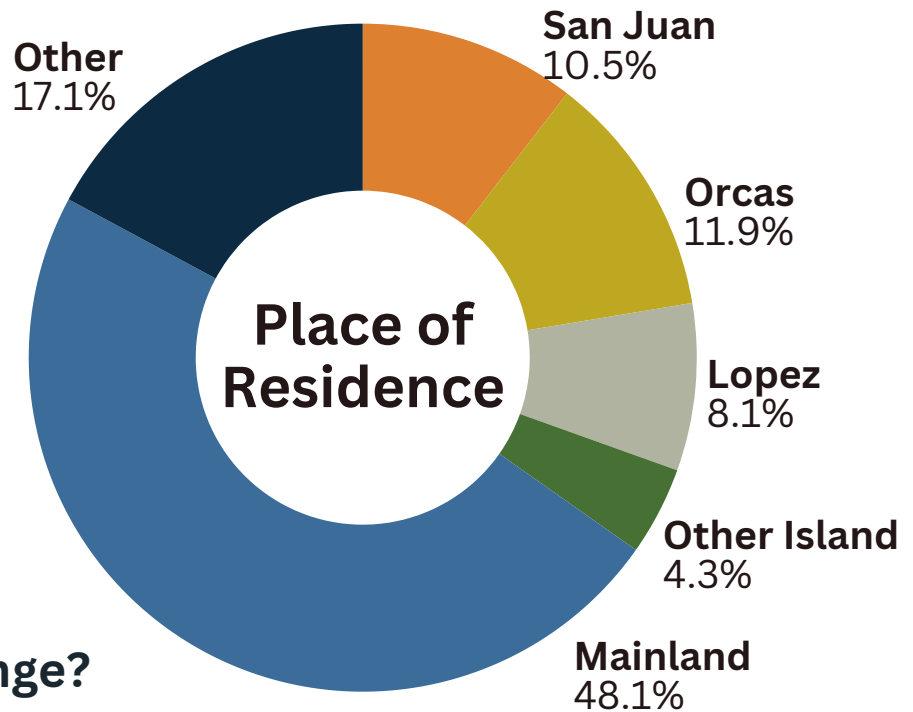
# COMMUNITY SURVEY

## Survey Distribution

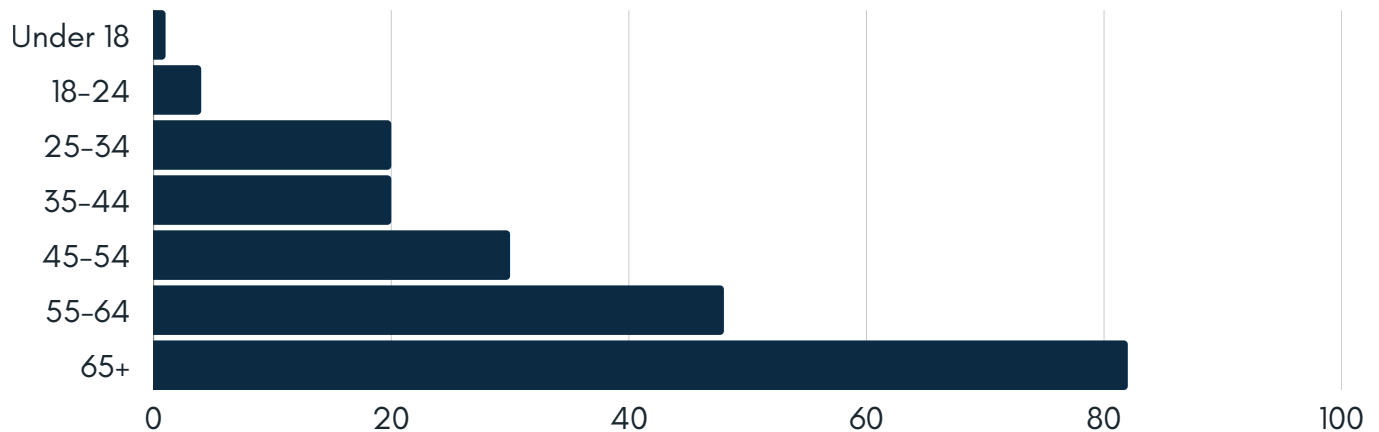
San Juan County ran a community survey for four weeks to collect feedback about the 10-week pilot project. The survey link was emailed to passengers, posted to social media, and included in press releases. The survey received 210 responses.

### 1. What is your primary place of residence?

*NOTE:  
All of the 'other' answers referred to locations on the mainland. If logged accurately, this would shift the 'Mainland' results to 65.2% of the total.*

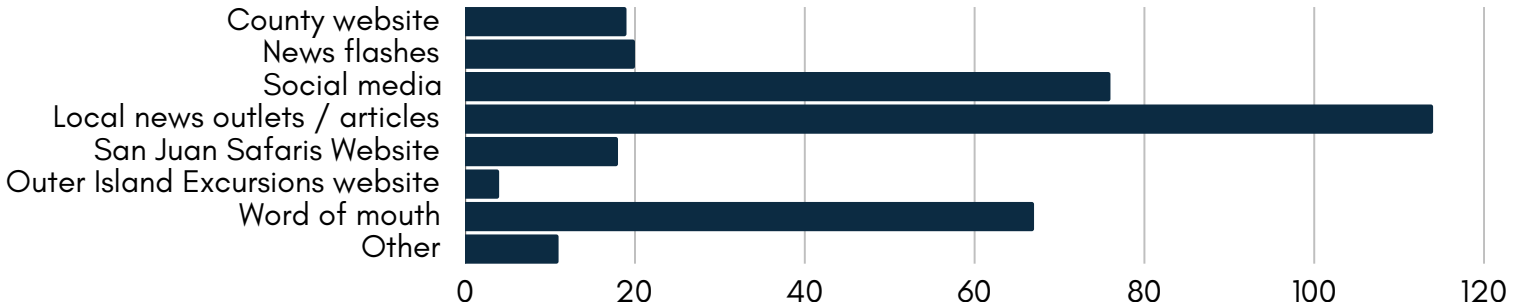


### 2. What is your age range?



# COMMUNITY SURVEY

### 3. How did you learn about the passenger boat services? (check all that apply)

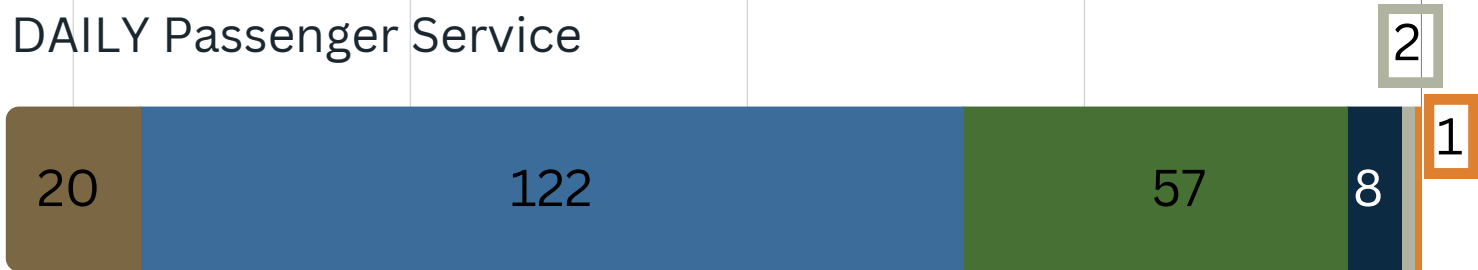


*Note: Many of the 'local news outlet' responses referred to County-generated News Flashes that were sent to the media. The discrepancy may refer to where they saw the information posted.*

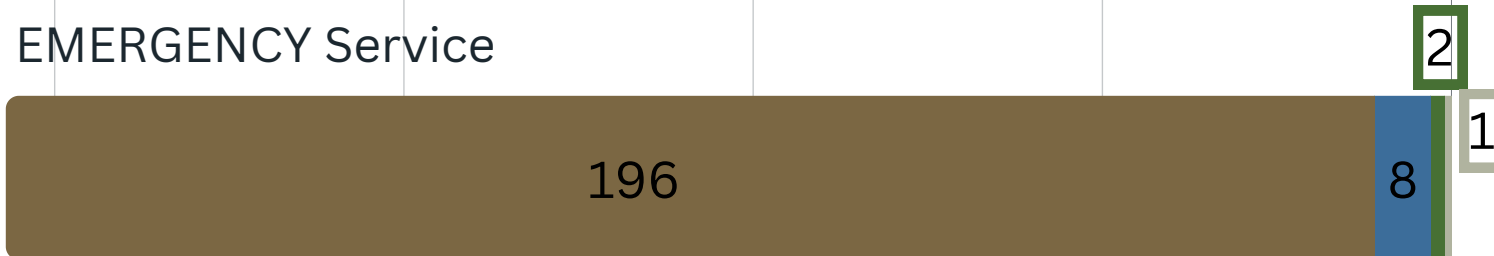
### 4. Please describe the frequency you used the services:



#### DAILY Passenger Service

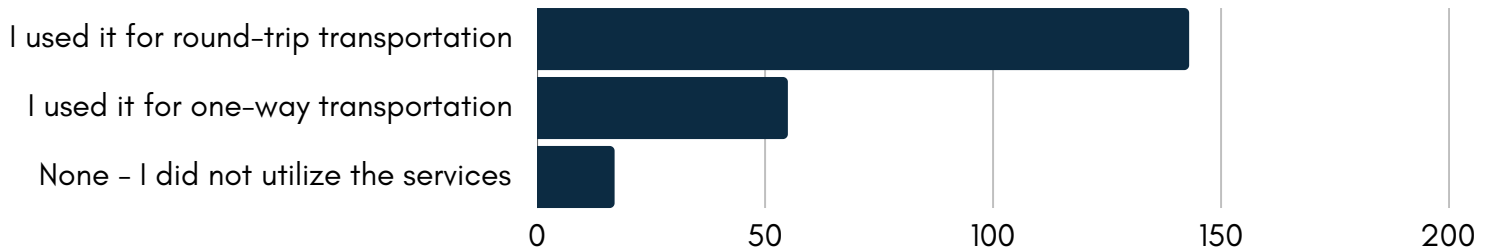


#### EMERGENCY Service

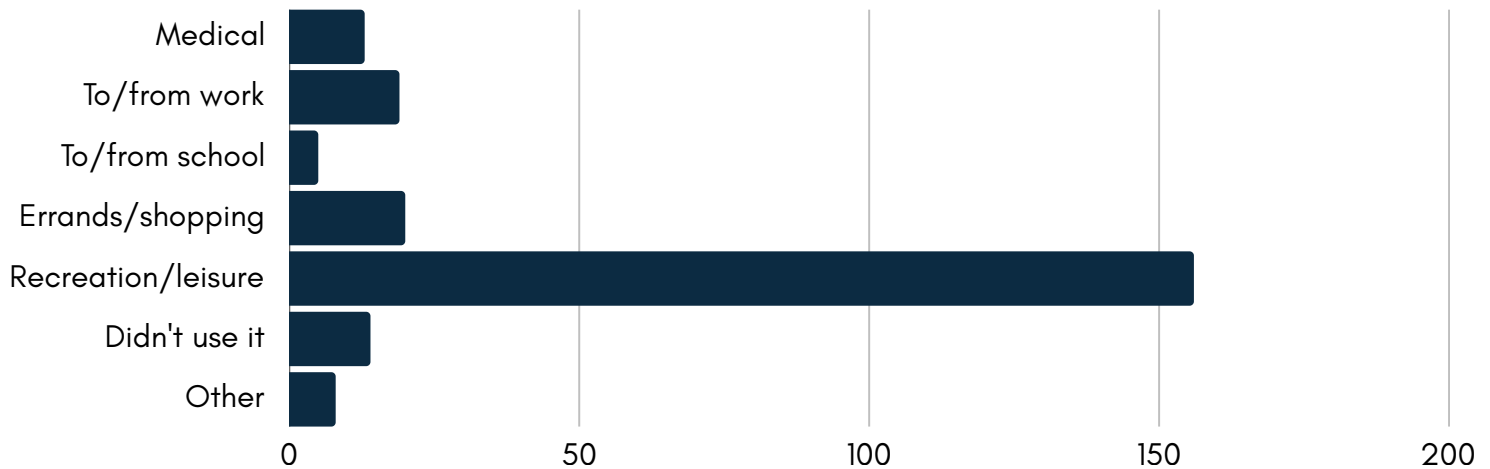


# COMMUNITY SURVEY

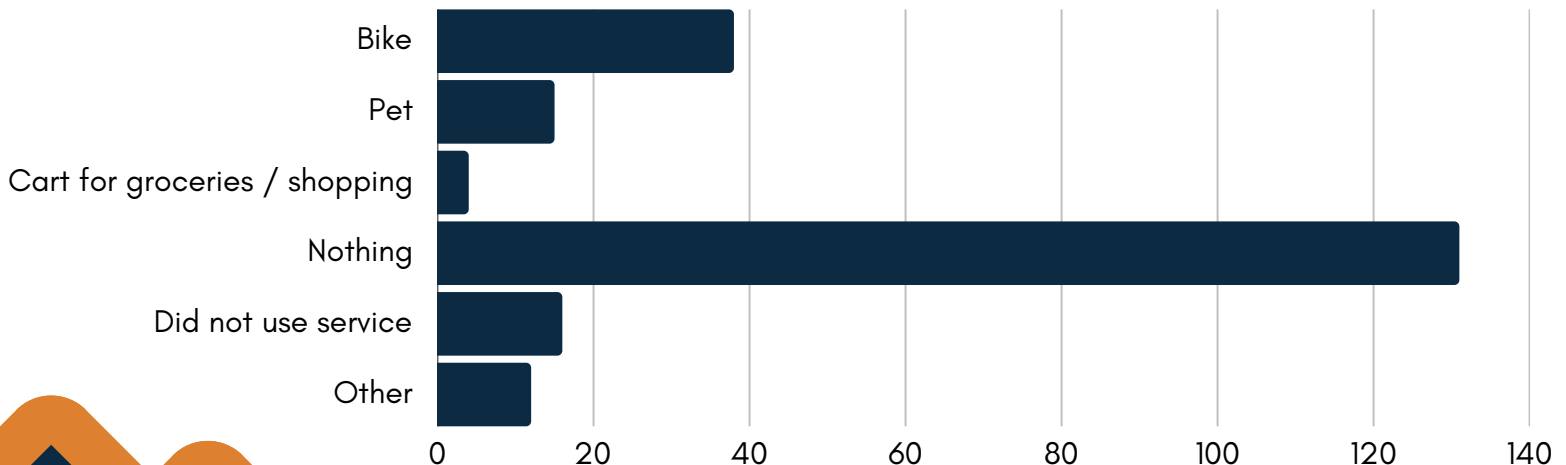
## 5. What types of services did you utilize? (Select all that apply)



## 6. What was your reason for using this passenger service? (check all that apply)

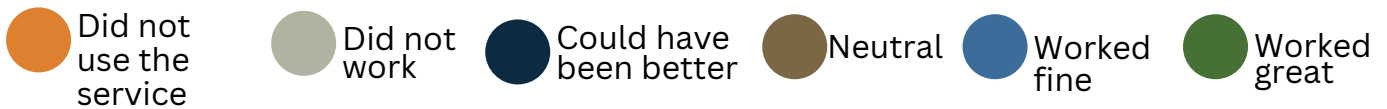


## 7. What did you bring on the boat? Check all that apply.



# COMMUNITY SURVEY

8. Please rate your overall experience with the following elements of the EMERGENCY interisland service:



Timing of the schedule



Notice of availability



Boat comfort & space



Reservation process

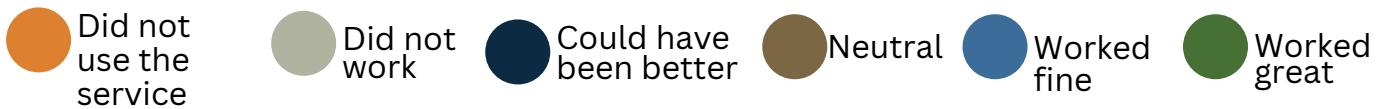


Pick-up / drop-off locations



# COMMUNITY SURVEY

9. Please rate your overall experience with the following elements of the DAILY service to Anacortes:



Timing of the schedule



Notice of availability



Boat comfort & space



Reservation process



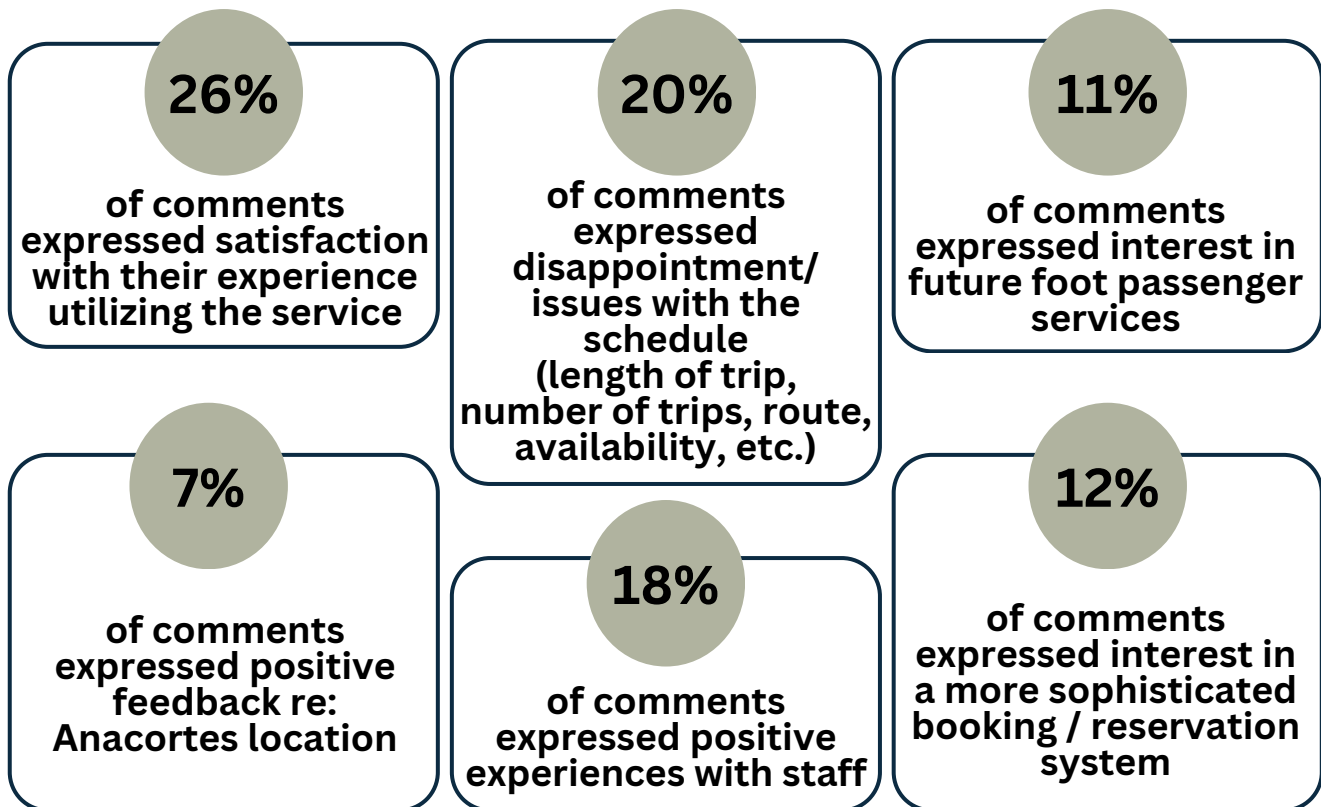
Pick-up / drop-off locations



# COMMUNITY SURVEY

## 10. Open response: Can you provide other feedback about your experience?

Open responses were coded to identify broad themes. Many of the 147 comments expressed multiple ideas and related to several themes. The percentages reflect how often a theme was reflected in the responses.



13% of comments expressed support for the pilot project as a concept

4% of comments expressed displeasure with the pilot project as a concept

### Other themes included:

- Disappointment in the short duration of the service
- Dissatisfaction with landing locations:
  - Preferences for Eastsound Village and Lopez Village
- Hope for an option to travel to Sidney or Victoria
- Support for a passenger fee

# COMMUNITY SURVEY

## 10. Open response: Can you provide other feedback about your experience?

### Interest in future foot passenger services

- *“Loved it!!! I would make a round trip at least twice a month if the cost is reasonable.”*
- *“Great service. I'd highly recommend continuing it & would utilize it frequently.”*
- *“I'm most interested in interisland service between Orcas and Friday Harbor, to take me between my home and job. Would be nice if there was service at the beginning and end of the workday. Really appreciated the trial opportunity and hope foot passenger service will become permanent.”*
- *“If it could be combined with access to a car share program, I could see this being revolutionary in my use of transportation via Ferry.”*
- *“It was a fantastic experience and I wouldn't mind paying a fee for this process. It was more comfortable, convenient, and reliable than the ferry.”*

### Positive feedback re: Anacortes location, staff, general experience

- *“The free and easily available parking at Cap Sante marina was great, and the ease of getting from car to ferry with bikes was great (much better than the WSF).”*
- *“The location of the mainland terminus at Cap Sante Marina for the daily service was a definite plus. I appreciated the ample free parking and proximity to businesses and restaurants.”*

### Disappointment with the schedule (length of trip, number of trips, route, availability, etc.)

- *“The daily passenger ferry was too long of a boat ride. I wish they went to Friday Harbor first.”*
- *“The travel time from Friday Harbor to Anacortes was uncompetitive with WSF.”*
- *“Suggest more frequent inter-island passages and one boat going and coming from Anacortes with scheduled connections with an inter-island boat.”*
- *“Length of time I think was the only downside but I was going for pleasure so I was not necessarily in a hurry.”*
- *“With the current schedule, one would have to spend the whole day in Anacortes. There needs to be a midday sailing to and from Anacortes so one could use it for a half day trip.”*
- *“It is impossible to use for a day trip. Once you get there, you have to leave by 3pm for the return trip, which isn't practical at all. One boat is great, but really inconvenient. Had to take the normal ferry back.”*

### Interest in a more sophisticated booking / reservation system

- *“Would prefer instant booking rather than having to submit an email request and wait to hear back, although the response was quick, it would be easier to manage if reservations could be made real time.”*
- *It would have been nice to be able to see what days and times had openings during the reservation process instead of waiting for an email stating that all or part of a reservation was not available.”*
- *“I would have appreciated a reservation system with instant feedback on ferry availability, but I understand the makeshift reservation system given the temporary nature of the ferry.”*

# COMMUNITY SURVEY

**11. If a service like this were available in the future, how likely would you:**



Use a daily foot-passenger service to the mainland



Use a daily foot-passenger interisland service



Pay a reasonable cost for daily service, such as the WSF walk-on fee



Support an emergency marine transportation service during ferry service disruptions



Pay a reasonable cost for emergency marine transportation service during ferry service disruptions, such as the WSF walk-on fee



# COMMUNITY SURVEY

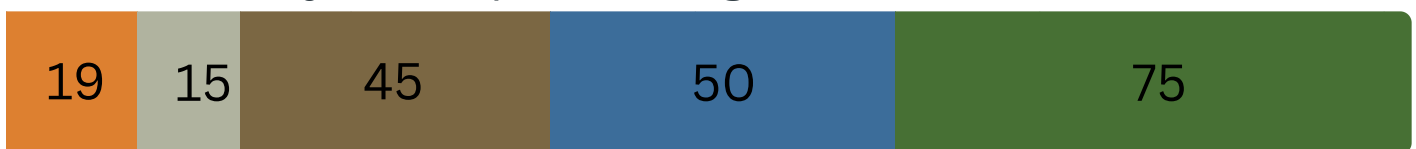
12. If San Juan County were to consider establishing a more permanent foot passenger marine transportation system in the future, how likely would you support:



Establishing a transit district via property taxes that covers the full scope of operations and is free to riders



Establishing a transit district via property taxes that is subsidized by riders purchasing tickets



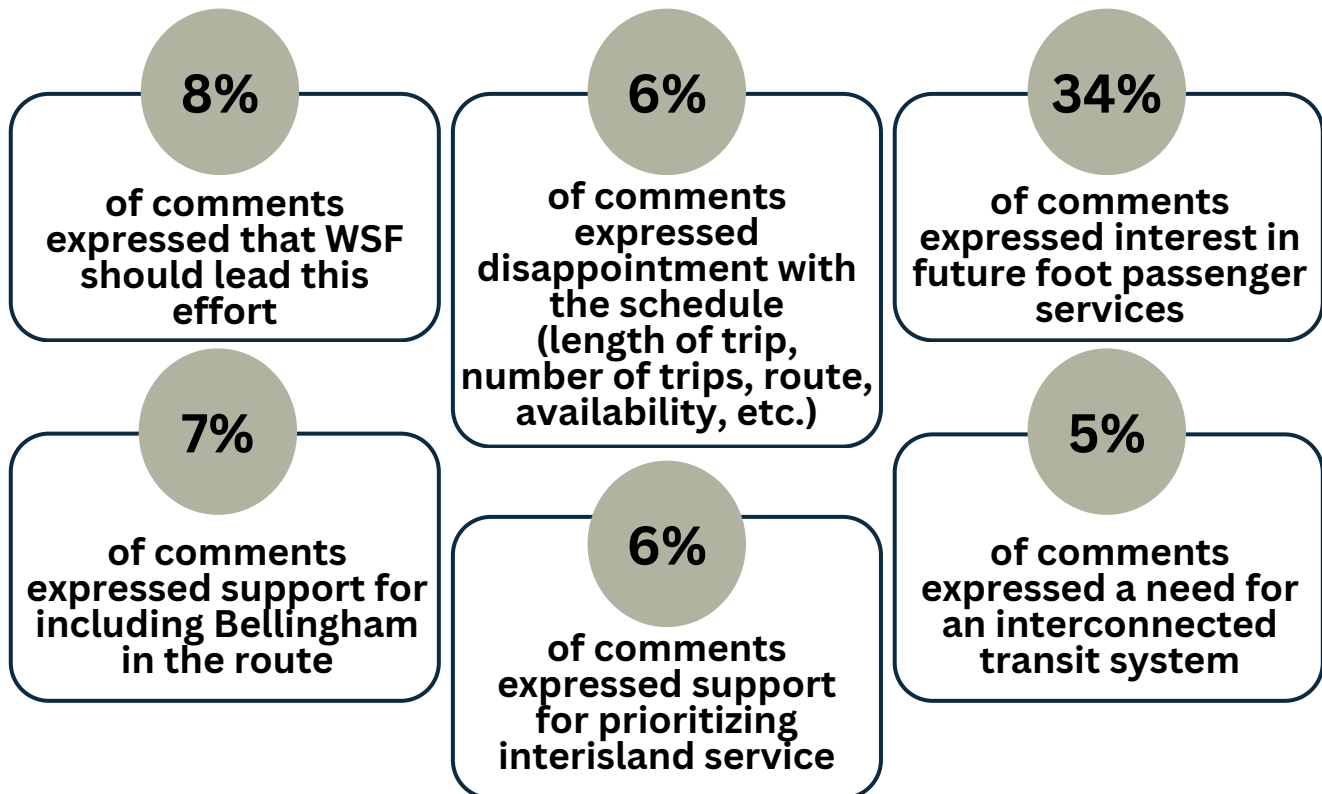
Establishing a transportation system funded purely by riders purchasing tickets



# COMMUNITY SURVEY

## 13. Open response: Please share any other thoughts or considerations you have about marine transportation services in San Juan County.

Open responses were coded to identify broad themes. Many of the 98 comments expressed multiple ideas and related to several themes. The percentages reflect how often a theme was reflected in the responses.



33% of comments expressed support for the pilot project as a concept

8% of comments expressed displeasure with the pilot project as a concept

### Other themes included:

- Property taxes - both for and against
- Passenger fees - both for and against
- Support for foot transportation as a means to increase tourism & boost the economy
- Support for the emergency option to remain on stand-by

7% of responses mentioned a hesitancy to comment as a mainlander

# COMMUNITY SURVEY

## 13. Open response: Please share any other thoughts or considerations you have about marine transportation services in San Juan County.

### Displeasure with the pilot project as a concept

- *“You only seemed to have robbed WSF of needed funds by allowing tourists a free ride!”*
- *“No pax only ferry transportation would pencil out without a reliable base of commuters and a population density of maybe 10 times what we currently have in San Juan County, not to mention the limited and seasonal economic base of the county. This ranks right up there with the WSF walk on study on wasted state tax money studying (and in this case trying) a water taxi service.”*
- *“Taxes are theft, you must build a system that puts 100% of the cost on the consumer. You’re causing economic and ecological damage with these subsidies!”*
- *“We need more boats but passenger only ferries are for a very small group of people. It does not even put a dent into the huge problem of ferry shortage. Not a fan! We need more ferries for the peak seasons times! So maybe have a passenger only ferry for walk on tourists. Then it would get used more adequately.”*

### WSF should lead this effort

- *“I believe the funds supported thru taxes are best suited for the State Ferry system. This pilot program provided entertaining sightseeing.”*
- *“I think the WSF could do better at incentivizing walk ons. ... I do not support an additional walk on ferry option unless it decreases the runs of the WSF. The Ferries are already running with so much unused capacity for walk ons.”*

### Disappointment with the schedule (length of trip, number of trips, route, availability, etc.)

- *“I thought the service was great but unfortunately the time it took to get me to Friday Harbor was just not worth it for a daily thing. If WA was going to support a foot passenger service...I think B'ham would be a better option. Bigger city which would draw more passengers. Also it could help get more workers to the Islands because they can't find affordable housing.”*
- *“The current schedule of having ONE pick up and one drop off for the entire day is not enough options for possible clientele.”*
- *“Foot passenger ferry to Bellingham would be INCREDIBLE and likely more used than Anacortes because there are no other options directly to Bellingham. I'd rarely take the foot passenger to the mainland if it takes longer than the car ferries.”*
- *“The reason I did not use the service was because of the length of journey from SJI to Anacortes. It's impractical to stop at Orcas and Lopez, making nearly 6 hrs round-trip. I would absolutely use a direct ferry service between SJI and Anacortes though!”*

### Prioritizing interisland service

- *“The interisland is the least prioritized route. There should be an option for islanders to travel between islands when the interisland is canceled which happens many times a week throughout the summer. To leave islanders to fend for themselves while all other routes are accommodated is a disservice to those of us who travel between islands.”*
- *“Fully support inter island foot passenger service, should start early in the day for shift workers at county / hospital jobs and potentially separate routes rather than do a milk run.”*

# CONCLUSION



## WHAT'S NEXT

San Juan County remains interested in supporting marine transportation alternatives throughout the islands and the mainland and continues to explore avenues to expand the network of available services.

## San Juan County + Transportation

The County's largest traditional transportation function falls in Public Works, specifically the planning, development and maintenance of road infrastructure and marine facilities. The County also provides multimodal transportation infrastructure via trails.

The County has other transportation functions including: connections to non-profits, engagement with other legislative entities, and a responsibility to update transportation-related documents such as the transportation element of the Comprehensive Plan, the Human Services Transportation Plan, and the Recreation, Open Space, and Stewardship Plan, among others.

San Juan County's [Transportation Voucher Program](#) also maintains a list of transportation providers including resource centers, local cab and taxi providers, water taxi providers, and transit services like SJ Transit and 'Island Rides.'

## Contact

For a complete list of information about the County's pilot project to establish marine transportation services, please visit the project page:

<https://engage.sanjuancountywa.gov/san-juan-county-emergency-transportation-services>

## County Transportation Projects

- **Transportation Voucher Program:** increases transportation access for vulnerable community members who cannot operate or afford a personal vehicle.
- **Transportation & Climate Elements:** The County's Comprehensive Plan includes a Transportation and Climate Element that study the intersection of climate /transportation needs in the islands.

## County Transportation Committees

- Ferry Advisory Committee
- SWISS Regional Transportation Subcommittee
- North Sound Transportation Alliance
- Internal Transportation Working Group