

WSF 2020 COVID RESPONSE SERVICE PLAN

Updated June 4, 2020

Document Summary

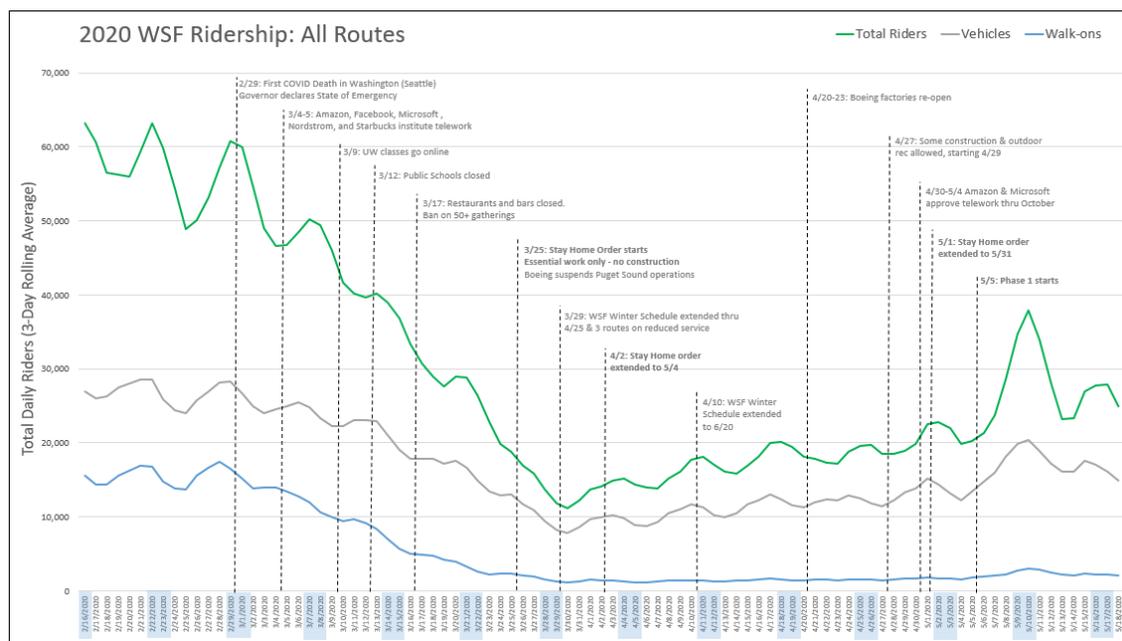
Practically every individual and organization around the world has been affected by the COVID-19 virus, and Washington State Ferries is no exception. WSF’s ability to provide ferry service has been limited by a number of factors, including: 1), a steep drop in ridership; 2), unavailability of crewmembers especially vulnerable to the virus; 3), a backlog of vessel maintenance; and 4), significant decreases in revenue. These four factors—ridership, crewing, vessels, funding—comprise the four pillars of service that must all be present for WSF to fully operate its ferry service.

One of the many ways WSF has adapted to COVID-19 has been to extend its “winter season” schedule into the summer months, with several routes operating below these baseline “winter” levels. WSF will not likely be able to restore these routes to what we are now referring to as a “Baseline Schedule” until at least Phase 4 of Governor Inslee’s [“Safe Start”](#) plan for recovery. However, because there is no definitive timeline for this phased recovery, and the global response to the pandemic remains unknown, WSF cannot reliably set a service schedule based on arbitrary or seasonal calendar dates. What this document proposes WSF does is take a similarly phased or modular approach to service, adding supplemental service to a baseline schedule when all four pillars of service are available.

Background

Since the COVID pandemic hit the region hard in late February/early March, WSF has experienced a number of significant impacts that forced the agency to significantly reduce its service. These include:

1. **A precipitous drop in ridership.** As more employers instituted telework policies and the Governor issued a [stay-at-home order](#) restricting travel and business, ridership fell to historic lows. By March 31, total ridership had fallen 75% compared to the last week of February, which is the middle of WSF’s “winter season” and historically the slowest time of the year. Vehicle ridership fell by 63%, with walk-on passenger ridership falling by 90%. While ridership is slowly climbing back out of the trenches and has seen some relative peaks on holiday weekends, as of late May it remains at about 60% below normal.



2. **A lack of sufficient crewing.** Even prior to COVID-19, WSF was challenged by a rapidly aging and retiring workforce, leading to a scarcity of licensed crewmembers available to operate ferries at Coast Guard-mandated levels. With the Governor’s “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order, this challenge has intensified; approximately 150 members of the marine operations crew who are over age 65 or considered high-risk are currently teleworking and unavailable to sail. It is unlikely they will be returning to work until Phase 4 of the [Governor’s four-phase plan for reopening Washington](#). It is also worth noting that although these employees likely won’t be available for work until Phase 4, non-essential travel restrictions are likely to be lifted before then, in Phase 3 of the Governor’s plan.

3. **Suspension of vessel maintenance activity.** Critical vessel preservation and maintenance work at WSF Eagle Harbor Maintenance Facility was suspended for several weeks following the stay-at-home order. In addition, work schedules at commercial shipyards were disrupted, the supply chain for vessel parts and equipment has been experiencing delays, and the Coast Guard temporarily discontinued its practice of in-person vessel inspections. As a result, there is a backlog of vessel work that will prevent WSF from having enough vessels to operate at full capacity for several weeks.

4. **Loss of revenue.** With a significant, sudden drop in ridership, WSF has experienced a corresponding drop in fare revenue. Total farebox revenue in March and April 2020 was approximately \$14M, just half of what was forecast to be collected. (Farebox revenue for the same time period in 2019 was \$29M.) In addition, WSF has experienced other COVID-related revenue losses, such as the loss of concession fees from galley closures, a dip in advertising, and cessation of activities such as film shoots and tabletop promotions. Overall, WSDOT is anticipating transportation revenue losses across the state to be approximately \$100M per month. While WSF made its initial service reductions primarily out of concern for health and safety, revenue shortfalls will impact service capability going forward.

Extended “Winter” Schedule = Baseline Schedule

As a response to the pandemic and the impacts described above, WSF extended its “winter” sailing season until June 20. Going forward, this will be referred to as the “Baseline Schedule” to minimize confusion and more accurately reflect the reality that WSF has been operating on the same schedule across multiple seasons throughout the calendar year.

In addition to operating on the Baseline Schedule, WSF further reduced service below the baseline level on routes that were especially affected by COVID-19. These routes had extremely low levels of utilization compared to other routes. A route-by-route description of baseline service and where WSF is operating below the baseline follows.

BASELINE / OFF-PEAK / LOW SEASON SERVICE (PREVIOUSLY CALLED “WINTER SCHEDULE”)

1. **Anacortes/San Juan Islands**—Currently operating on baseline schedule, with four vessels (three vessels operating between Anacortes and the islands daily, with one vessel providing interisland service on weekdays only).

2. **Anacortes/Sidney, BC**—Route suspended as border crossings for non-essential travel remain restricted through at least June 21, and cruise ships are banned through October 31.

3. **Edmonds/Kingston**—Currently operating just under baseline level with two vessels; the last round-trip sailing on Fridays, Saturdays (departing Kingston at 12:20 a.m.) is temporarily suspended.

4. **Fauntleroy/Vashon Island/Southworth**—Baseline schedule calls for three vessels on weekdays, two on weekends. Route is currently on a 2-boat weekday schedule; last round-trip (departing Vashon at 1:25 a.m.) temporarily suspended.
5. **Mukilteo/Clinton**—Currently operating just under baseline with two vessels; the last round-trip sailing (departing Clinton at 12:30 a.m.) is temporarily suspended.
6. **Point Defiance/Tahlequah**—Currently operating at baseline with one vessel.
7. **Port Townsend/Coupeville**—Currently operating at baseline with one vessel.
8. **Seattle/Bainbridge Island**—Operating below baseline levels with only one vessel serving the route, which normally has two vessels. In addition, the last round-trip sailing of the day is temporarily suspended (departing Bainbridge at 12:55 a.m. on weekdays and at 1:25 a.m. on weekends).
9. **Seattle/Bremerton**— Operating below baseline levels with only one vessel serving the route, which normally has two vessels. In addition, the last round-trip sailing of the day (departing Brem at 11:40 p.m.) is temporarily suspended.

Restoring Service to the Baseline

Under the Governor’s [“Safe Start” plan](#) for economic recovery, Washington is following a phased approach to reopening businesses, gatherings, recreation, and travel. Each phase is expected to last a minimum of three weeks, though the plan is subject to change as the pandemic evolves. While restrictions on non-essential travel are lifted in Phase 3 of the plan, high-risk populations don’t resume public interaction until Phase 4.

Until all four “pillars of service”—ridership, crewing, vessels, funding—are in place at the same time, WSF will not be able to restore these routes to baseline levels. As outlined above, a backlog of vessel maintenance has left WSF without a sufficient number of vessels to operate a full baseline schedule until early to mid-June. More importantly, WSF currently has 150 crewmembers who are considered high-risk and are not available to return to work until at least Phase 4 of the Safe Start plan. This means that WSF will not be able to restore these routes to full service until that time. However, it is worth noting that ridership remains at less than half of its normal levels, with the Governor’s stay-at-home order still in place.

Predicting the Future

As WSF continues to adapt to this evolving pandemic, there has been massive speculation about what the “new normal” will look like for mass transit agencies—not just in Puget Sound, but all over the world. Will more people telework on a regular basis? Will they drive cars to physically distance themselves instead of riding buses or trains? What about biking and walking? There are countless variables and unknowns that make it virtually impossible to predict with any specificity what ridership will look like a month from now, let alone in six months or one year.

In addition, the Governor’s phased plan does not attach hard and fast dates to the phases of recovery. Rather, each phase is expected to last a minimum of three weeks, with some Washington counties progressing through the phases more quickly than others depending on COVID infection rates. The Governor has compared this process to “the turning of a dial, not the flipping of a switch.” This indicates a very fluid, evolving situation that may even need to be dialed back if the recovery and reopening lead to an increase in confirmed cases and deaths.

All of this uncertainty—and the simple fact that without a vaccine, COVID-19 is still a threat to public health and safety—means that WSF cannot reliably set a service schedule based on arbitrary or seasonal calendar dates. Instead, WSF must also treat its service schedule like a dial, adding service when feasible or reducing service as necessary.

WSF’s “Supplemental” Sailing Schedule

As of this draft, WSF has been operating at or below its Baseline Schedule since January 5. There have been occasional spikes in ridership on some weekends and a small number of peak commute-time sailings have been close to or at vehicle capacity, but overall the ferry system is ably accommodating all of its ridership demand. WSF will continue monitoring overall ridership and specific periods of high demand throughout the service day as reopening progresses.

As the demand inevitably grows throughout the summer—as more restrictions on non-essential travel are lifted and the state progresses through its recovery plan—WSF proposes adding blocks of service to the baseline schedule on certain routes as needed, rather than shifting to an entirely new sailing schedule. This “modular” approach to service will allow WSF some flexibility in responding to the COVID pandemic as it evolves, and it also allows the agency to more nimbly implement schedule changes, including the ability to more readily make reservations available for customers.

In contrast, the traditional four-season sailing schedule system that WSF has been operating under requires a tremendous amount of lead time before that schedule can be activated, with a variety of WSF departments working to program various aspects of the new schedule into a number of different systems and applications, administer crew bidding processes, and position vessels at the proper terminals. Under the modular or supplemental service approach, these additional service components can already be “programmed” in the system, implemented with less effort, and activated on shorter notice.

PROPOSED SUPPLEMENTS TO SERVICE ABOVE BASELINE

Assuming that all routes have been restored to their baseline levels, WSF proposes supplementing baseline service on the following routes as long as there is sufficient ridership demand, crew availability, vessel availability, and funding to do so.

Anacortes/San Juan Islands

- If available, assign three larger vessels to route to absorb any traffic increases
- Add sailings to the #2 vessel and operate a Friday schedule Monday through Thursday
- If Canada border reopens, add Sidney service only if other factors allow

Fauntleroy/Vashon Island/Southworth

- Operate a third vessel on weekends for 8 hours a day

Mukilteo/Clinton

- Increase service on the #2 vessel by one round-trip on Thursday evenings, and three additional round-trips on Fridays, one additional round-trip on Saturday, and two additional round-trips on Sunday

Port Townsend/Coupeville

- Add a second vessel to the route

- Add one round-trip on Fridays and Saturdays to the #1 vessel, departing from Port Townsend at 10:00 pm

Conclusion

Like everyone, WSF has been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and must now continually reassess and reevaluate its service and its way of doing business. To help accomplish this, WSF has been closely monitoring sailing-by-sailing ridership and trends, as well as data points across all sectors that might impact the future of ferry service. While there are no obvious answers or perfect solutions, WSF believes that a phased or modular approach to increasing service—much like the Governor’s phased recovery plan—will provide a pragmatic and efficient transition through the pandemic to an eventual “new normal.”