

# RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

## Project Information

**REPORT NAME:** Determining State and Federal Transportation Responsibilities to Residents on Islands

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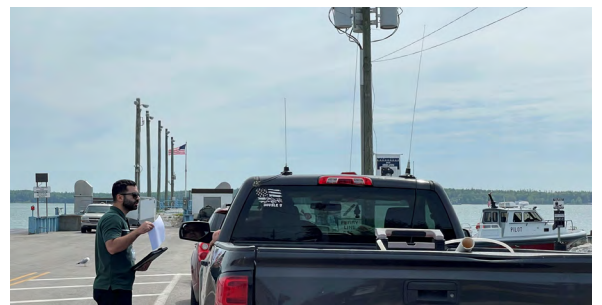
Janet Geissler, Mary Hoffmeyer,  
Brian Kass, Peter Krumm (FHWA),  
Tina Makarewicz, and Elisha Wulff.

## Evaluating Michigan's ferry services, funding and policies to support island access

The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) oversees ferry service for Michigan's islands as part of its mission to provide safe and equitable access to state residents. To identify ways to improve service to island residents now and in the future, MDOT sought a more comprehensive understanding of the critical aspects of ferry service. This research study provided data on Michigan's ferry operations, state and federal funding for island transportation in Michigan, and comparable policies from other states. From these research results, MDOT can develop policies and strategic plans that will continue to support safe and effective ferry services for its island residents and visitors.

### PROBLEM

To ensure equal mobility and accessibility for all state residents, MDOT considers the needs of thousands of island residents who rely on privately owned ferries to access healthcare, emergency services, jobs, and other economic opportunities. Budgeting decisions require accurate information on current ferry routes, ridership of these routes, and any unmet needs for people living and doing business on Michigan's islands. There are also funding requirements related to the maintenance of docks and boats, freight considerations, and federal funding resources that carry specific reporting expectations. These various aspects of policymaking, planning and reporting all pointed to a need for a



Surveying Michigan ferry riders helps MDOT assess the transportation needs of island residents.

systematic research effort to capture critical data related to ferry service in Michigan.

### RESEARCH

Since Michigan is one of many states that relies on ferries to meet the needs of its residents, a nationwide survey of other states' funding approaches and operational

*“We look forward to incorporating the outcomes and recommendations from this study in our planning efforts as we work to provide optimal transportation options for all island residents.”*

## **Valerie Shultz**

Project Manager

strategies identified potential efficiencies and options for future consideration. Investigators searched literature on ferry services nationwide and on Michigan’s ferry operations, underscoring the competitive funding environment and offering data on past efforts to analyze ferry usage, maintenance and best practices.

A subsequent survey of ferry users from four northern islands, including Beaver Island on Lake Michigan, and Sugar, Neebish, and Drummond Islands on Lake Huron, and interviews with other local authorities measured satisfaction with current routes and identified perceived gaps. Participants also offered their perspectives on the roles played by state and federal authorities in providing transportation to island residents.

Analysis of economic factors yielded data on maintenance costs and equipment replacement issues across multiple ferry operators. The economic analysis included a comparison of state-to-federal funding ratios across all states that rely on ferry service for their residents, while also providing recommendations for future budgeting and planning considerations.

## **RESULTS**

The survey of states with ferry operations revealed different approaches to ferry transportation oversight. In most cases,

state transportation agencies oversee only ferry operators that receive state or federal funding and do not consistently collect data on riders or operations. Factors influencing short-term (three-year) budgetary increases include aging infrastructure, growth in economic activity, and investment in new vessels. The survey also revealed that Michigan has a lower ratio of state to federal funding compared with the nationwide average.

Input from island residents revealed opportunities for future MDOT consideration. Ticket pricing for residents and commuters was a common theme, as was the need to provide appropriate services to accommodate freight and other commercial requirements. Follow-up interviews with surveyed riders and island community members suggested a possible need to standardize procedures for emergency services.

For insights into operations and maintenance needs, the researchers evaluated approaches to service oversight, resource planning, infrastructure maintenance, and other considerations through a comparison analysis between ferry operators in Michigan and those in other states. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were identified for each topic.

Finally, the analysis addressed four additional islands that do not currently receive state funding: Manitou Islands in Lake Michigan, Bois Blanc Island in Lake Huron, Grand Island in Lake Superior, and Harsens Island in Lake St. Clair. Though interest in state funding varied among operators, researchers proposed other sources as options to fund ferry service in these areas, indicating that MDOT may be able to help other ferry operators connect with federal and other funding sources.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

Drawing upon effective practices within Michigan and from other states, the analysis reveals different approaches to funding, oversight and metrics for ferry operators

servicing island residents. With this information and with ongoing input from ferry riders, MDOT can better assess its current state and evaluate options for enhancements in the future. Though needs vary from island to island, ferry operators share MDOT’s commitment to safety and access for all residents and visitors. Informed policies for assessing and meeting operational needs can ensure equal access and allow MDOT to adapt as island populations shift over time.

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### **Final report and related materials are available online at**

[MDOTjboss.state.mi.us/TSSD/tssdResearchAdminDetails.htm?keyword=1727](http://MDOTjboss.state.mi.us/TSSD/tssdResearchAdminDetails.htm?keyword=1727).

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