

Washington State Ferries

2040 Long Range Plan

Appendix A: Progress since the 2009 Plan

Progress since the 2009 Long Range Plan

The 2009 WSF Long Range Plan sought to strike a balance between a constrained service and capital investment strategy with long-term funding requirements. The 2009 Plan proposed capital investments in both vessels and terminals, as well as recommending new ways to manage increased demand, such as a vehicle reservations system.

Increasing efficiency through adaptive management strategies

The 2009 Plan identified tools for WSF to manage demand on the ferry system. Based on direction from the Legislature, WSF worked with the Washington State Transportation Commission to determine which strategies, known as adaptive management strategies, would be the most effective and feasible.

WSF has implemented four key adaptive management strategies from the 2009 Plan:

Vehicle reservation system

The 2009 Plan, along with a follow-up reservations study, resulted in Phase I of the reservations system being implemented on the Port Townsend-Coupeville route in 2012. Phase II was implemented in the San Juan Islands in 2015. The implementation of reservations has allowed for predictability on routes where customers could not previously be guaranteed a space on their desired sailing. The reservation system has also reduced the amount of ferry traffic waiting on local streets. Reservations have helped manage demand by incentivizing customers to choose sailings over the course of the entire day, rather than clustering demand only at peak periods.

Transit enhancements

Enhanced transit connections were provided to terminals through ongoing coordination with transit agencies. These improved connections will make ferry service more attractive for walk-on passengers and should encourage a shift away from commuting by single occupant vehicle.

Pricing strategies

WSF implemented two new pricing strategies designed to optimize the use of deck space on the vessels, including increasing the price differential between vehicle and passenger fares (2013), and discounting the fare for vehicles less than 14 feet long (2010). Additionally, WSF implemented a lower fare for youth ages 6 to 18.

Customer information improvements

WSF has implemented two types of improvements in customer information, aimed at encouraging customers to adjust their travel times and modes through better information and trip planning tools. WSF launched the “Best Travel Times” feature on their website, which shows the most congested sailing times for each route, along with the “Terminal Status” feature, which displays how many vehicle spaces are remaining on each upcoming sailing.

Capital program for preservation and improvement

The capital expenditures outlined in the 2009 Plan included investments for emergency repairs, preservation, and new construction of both vessels and terminals.

Vessel investment plan

The most significant capital funding expenditure in the 2009 Plan was for acquisition of 10 new vessels, which were intended to enable the retirement of several aging vessels. WSF had received three Kwa-di Tabil Class vessels as of 2012 and four Olympic Class vessels as of 2018. The 2009 Plan recommended building the three remaining vessels by 2030 to replace additional retiring vessels. The 2009 Plan’s recommendations included only vessel acquisitions for one-to-one replacement of retiring vessels.

Terminal investment plan

WSF has also made investments in terminals based on the 2009 Plan recommendations. Preservation and seismic retrofit work has occurred at Vashon Island, Coupeville, Bainbridge Island and Friday Harbor. Two major construction projects are currently underway: a new multimodal terminal at Mukilteo, and reconstruction and preservation of Colman Dock in downtown Seattle.

WSF’s capital investment plan continues to carry a budget allocation for recommended improvements at Edmonds to enhance multimodal connections in 2029. The Legislature did not fund the recommended replacement of the Anacortes terminal in 2011, so that major terminal project no longer appears in the WSF capital investment plan.

The 2009 Plan also led to the development of the Terminal Design Manual. This manual provides direction on the standard operational and design parameters for all terminal projects, with the goal of ensuring efficient operations and extending life expectancy of that infrastructure.

Focus on system utilization through new level of service standards

The Legislature directed WSF to revise its framework for deciding how to alleviate congestion; this framework is referred to as WSF's "level of service standards." The Legislature advised WSF to focus on overall system utilization across the service day rather than focus on demand only during peak travel periods. WSF's proposed, and later adopted, level of service standards measure vehicle demand only.

WSF analyzes its levels of service using a two-tiered approach that monitors only vehicle congestion levels. First, WSF looks at a route's total vehicle capacity on a route-by-route basis during low-, middle-, and high-ridership seasons. The congestion levels for Tier 1 and Tier 2 are based on a notable percentage of total vehicle capacity over the entire month. Once a route reaches the Tier 1 level of service standard, WSF explores adaptive management strategies to address congestion. If a route reaches the Tier 2 level of service standard, WSF looks to capital investments to increase capacity on the route.

The percentage of full sailings to reach Tier 1 differs for various routes; see the Managing Growth section for more details and analysis. Using 2016 ridership data, two routes have met or exceeded the first tier (Mukilteo-Clinton in May and Port Townsend-Coupeville in May and August). No routes have met the second-tier threshold.