

PUNITIVE TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

The last few weeks have been bad for all citizens of Guemes Island.

We lost one of the most valued members of the Guemes Island Community, Joseph Miller. His lifelong efforts to fight for the soul of Guemes Island extended from keeping Nori farming off our shores to reducing noise pollution from Navy jets. His legacy of community action has been immortalized through Linetime. Joseph was an island giant that will be greatly missed by those who knew him and those who will forever benefit from his efforts.

We also learned conclusively that Skagit County does not wish to actively engage with the citizens of Guemes Island regarding the ferry system that serves as our only road to and from our homes, our employment, our schools and all services.

A “Work Session with Public Works,” was held on November 14TH in the Board of County Commissioner’s (BOCC) Meeting Room to discuss the future of our ferry fares and possible citizen input that revealed their true opinions of islanders. This was not an opportunity for public comment.

It would be beneficial for every citizen on Guemes Island to listen to/to watch this 59 minute video to hear for themselves what transcended during this meeting. Option two would be to read my long summary and commentary below.

Link to video (It takes a while to download):

<https://ftp3.skagitcounty.net/?ShareToken=CFCE95F5429B1437197B7921047835E625DB5BC8>

30% rate increase is going to happen – There was zero BOCC discussion as to why such a significant increase is warranted except that it is necessary to achieve the 65% fare box revenue goal by 2028. There was no discussion regarding cost cutting initiatives or questions asked about why last year’s projected Operations and Maintenance (O&M) expenses for 2025 of \$3,628,363 skyrocketed to a new projection for 2025 of \$4,690,434 – over \$1 million more.

Nothing mentioned about the impact on revenue from youth riding free or if a funding source has yet to be identified. No comments about including the \$350K the ferry received in 2023 from a Federal Ferry Boat Fund grant in revenue totals for the fare calculation.

What happened to the 15% increase discussed last year that was going to be implemented this year with rates gradually increasing for the next 5 years?

Multi-ride fares – They want to eliminate this completely. Ferry Operations Division Manager Rachel Rowe, in a consistent pattern of using a few negative examples to misrepresent the entire island community, convinced the BOCC that her staff was at risk of needing police intervention due to enforcing expiration dates.

The only incident I am aware of where law enforcement was involved regarding punch cards was made by a ferry rider against Rowe for physically taking the rider's punch card from them. I would like to know the results of the county's investigation that supposedly was going to occur in May of 2023 when Rowe suddenly appeared on the dock and without the courtesy of any communication, spent three days punching cards in the faces of ferry riders. I don't doubt there were a few islanders who became excessively upset for having hundreds of dollars disappear before their eyes, but a government entity should not financially punish an entire community for the actions of some.

A little communication reminding islanders not to use expired cards could have prevented everything. *If a Ferry Worker does not possess the ability to tell someone their punch card is expired, I think they would also have a tough time telling someone to extinguish their cigarette and maybe should find another job that doesn't deal with the general public.*

Commissioner Janicki commented on our “entitlement perspective” and the “abuse on the staff” as reasons to eliminate the Multi-ride discount. Janicki also discussed what the consultant (KPF) had said during last year's rate study about Skagit County discounting the multi-ride fare “deeper” than other ferry systems. Rowe said the norm of multi-ride discounts is “between 10 and 15% - Whatcom is a little bit higher.” What KPF actually reported in their 2023 Rate Study was, “**The multi-ride discounts offered by the 2022 Guemes Island Fare Schedule were similar or lower than the level of discount offered by the ferry services reviewed.**” The KPF study showed the Pierce County discount at 20%, Whatcom County's discounts ranged from 20-65%, and the Washington State Ferry System (WSFS) ranged from 19-58%. Guemes Island discounts in 2022 ranged from 8-23%.

Facts matter. (Link to KPF study below). It is the responsibility of every public official to present accurate information to the BOCC.

Commissioner Browning made the non-sequitur comment that offering a discounted multi-ride pass was like expecting a discount when a county building inspector comes to your house to inspect construction. Browning also stated, “It just seems unfair that they expect that we were going to constantly coddle them and let them off the hook. Rising costs of life and yes, I'm sorry, it's expensive.” He went so far to say if they decided to offer the

discount, it should be done with the caveat that if anyone complains it will be taken away. Commissioner Wesen argued against that.

*Eliminating the Multi-ride fare for everyone because of the behavior of a few individuals is **punitive** action and should not be factored into the decision for fares for all citizens. The standardized 15% discount instituted last year was a solid middle ground that helped support working islanders and all residents with measure of affordability to live on the island year round.*

Recently county ferry workers demonstrated their own entitlement perspective when they commandeered the parking area created specifically for a Para-transit bus turnaround area to be their own “Ferry Employee Parking Only” near the terminal. This has since been changed back, at least for now, thanks to the efforts of Skagit Transit. When able bodied people feel it is OK to take away something meant for people with disabilities, management’s decision making process warrants questioning.

Ferry Committee – Janicki mentioned that a Ferry Committee may be necessary for optics. Rowe again chose to use a vocal minority to punish the silent majority by telling the BOCC that the Ferry Committee isn’t recognized by the “majority of the islanders - even less so now.”

Rowe presented the resolution to disenfranchise the Guemes Island Ferry Committee (GIFC) in July 27, 2023 to minimize all communications to Guemes Island property owners and citizen groups to one public meeting a year.

Here are some of the best comments on the value of public input from Rowe (RR) and Public Works Director Grace Kane (GK):

RR: “I would ask why does it not look good because you are not required to meet with them and they’re not a formal body. And what we are required to do is hold a public hearing and hear from all of our citizens and have a public comment period which we are doing. So legally we’re following the statutes I understand it doesn’t look good to the people who think that they should be involved but we simply aren’t required.”

GK: “I was given some authority to make some decisions. I will listen to my division managers of options. But I am not giving away that authority to make the decisions they don’t like.”

GK: “People are not going to like whatever decisions you are going to make. You are going to piss some people off. And the transparency is, if you don’t do what I do, than it’s not being transparent. “

GK: “Do you guys want to end the negotiating?”

GK: “When you give them an inch they are not going to say thank you. It is like why just an inch?”

*These comments made by Rowe and Kane are in direct contrast to Skagit County’s 2022-2032 Strategic Plan which include goals for **Collaboration, Communication, Customer Service, Accessibility and Transparency** – these goals are supposed to be inclusive for ALL Skagit County citizens and not exclusionary.*

Last year, KPFF recognized the importance of community involvement from stakeholders in their rate study fare policy recommendations. They did not recommend disenfranchising the Guemes Island Ferry Committee. **The Guemes Island ferry is currently the only formally unrepresented ferry system in the state of Washington.** The WSFS even goes beyond their committees for outreach with a Ferry Riders Opinion Group. (Link below)

There was some discussion by Commissioners on creating a new ferry committee, “appointed by Commissioners” as one option, but their overall failure to truly challenge the comments made by Rowe and Kane except from an optics consideration emphasized how little the citizen’s of Guemes Island mean to any of them.

EMS services - While options for EMS services are currently being worked out with Fire District 17 and the Anacortes Fire Department, the ferry wishes to no longer be part of after hour runs - unless paid well for it. Browning believes a helicopter is our best option for emergency services.

Browning’s non-EMS professional analysis differs from that of Fire District 17 Chief Cole who has explained that helicopters are weather dependent and response time depends greatly on availability. Also, according to the County’s own BUILD federal grant application, “helicopter travel is neither the fastest nor the most practical means of transporting patients to the care they need.” The long standing tradition of the ferry providing EMS support has been downgraded to a courtesy service, like an airport shuttle, that may or may not be available when called. (I have attached links to obtain both Life Flight and Airlift NW insurance. Every person staying on the island beyond ferry scheduled hours should have this insurance.)

Propane is going to be more expensive to islanders – Under questioning from Commissioner Wesen, Rowe could not clearly explain the rationale for imposing a three hour charter fee at \$750/hr for this run, an increase to \$2,250 other than to say she had to pay for Haz-Mat training for the crew. Nor did she appear to know how much a run actually costs. She offered to reduce the fee to \$750. She also claimed that Pierce County ferry

does not have a Haz-Mat run which is an entirely false statement according to the Pierce County website.

In a previous meeting, Skagit Farmer Supply made it clear that any increase in their ferry fares will go straight to end users – islanders. This could mean up to a 30% increase in our propane expense. Another punitive tax to citizens.

New ticketing system is a go – This is happening and at least one person unbeknownst to all has successfully purchased a ticket through the app. There was no discussion about further beta testing after the apparent success from the one ticket purchase. No mention that the ongoing cost of the system will be 7% of all revenue adding \$94K/year. No discussion about electronic ticketing moving more vehicles through the system.

Will the \$94k a year expense bring \$94K in cost savings? Will a ticketing system reduce labor costs?

Other miscellaneous crimes committed by citizens - Commissioner Janicki said it was “inappropriate for people to discuss staffing” and “Lee is a Godsend.” Many islanders, including myself, did present cost cutting opportunities to help minimize the overall burden to the County Road Fund, which included eliminating the new assistant manager position costing \$85K/year. As far as I know, all conversations were strictly about the new expense, nothing about an individual in the position.

In 2023, 41% of the entire ferry budget went to salaries, wages and personnel benefits. It seems quite obvious why staffing would be important to discuss. The BOCC also recently approved \$15K to hire a consultant to create a newsletter and other communications which is another new additional cost they failed to mention in this meeting.

It is also important for all islanders to know that these same Commissioners all signed a letter to Governor Inslee asking the state legislature to fully fund the STATE ferry system. (Link to letter below). They clearly do not believe in funding their own ferry, nor did they ask the state to implement a 30% fare increase, ask to eliminate their multi-ride fares, disparage the majority of the citizens they represent, or ask to eliminate all citizen advisory committees. They did not call the users of the WSFS “entitled” or “coddled.”

Most of the letters sent in for public comment by the Guemes Island community, **which were responses to the questions posed by Rowe to the islanders**, highlighted the concerns about the affordability of continuing to live on the island. Anyone listening to this meeting will learn of the BOCC’s lack of concern for the islander’s well-being – including charging more for essential EMS service and increasing substantially the rising cost to heat homes.

Bottom line:

This unjustifiable 30% rate increase, the possibility of no Multi-ride discount, and eliminating the long standing traditions of EMS and affordable propane runs are the just the beginning. Will the ferry be 100% funded through ferry fares while they add unnecessary operating expenses and fail to include all revenue collected for the ferry into the fare calculation? What other County expenses will be diverted to Ferry O&M expenses like the County liability insurance? **What justifies increasing O&M expenditures to \$4.8 million in 2026-nearly \$2 million more than 2022 actual expenses?**

What would Joseph Miller would want us to do? I believe he would want us to fight for the heart and soul of Guemes Island. He would want us to stop Rowe and her island friends from silencing our voices and destroy what so many have dedicated their lives to preserve. He would want us to speak out against the County for failing to treat Guemes Island citizens with the same level of dignity and respect that all citizens deserve from their public officials. The goal of every county government should be to provide public services – even to those the government doesn't particularly like. This isn't just taxation without representation. This is **PUNITIVE TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION**. Time to make your voices heard.

Cindy Kamp

Here are links to our 40th District Representatives.

Representative Debra Lekanoff:

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/pbc/memberEmail/40/1> Representative

Liz Lovelett:

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/pbc/memberEmail/40/0> Representative

Alex Ramel:

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/pbc/memberEmail/40/2> Further

reading material:

Letter signed by Skagit County BOCC to Governor Inslee:

https://www.psrc.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/fund-our-ferries-letter-signatories_0.pdf

Here is a link to the Skagit County Build Grant Application where Public Works explained to our federal government the essential EMS use of the ferry (pages 9-10) as well as the importance of the ferry to island residents and to Skagit County as a whole (Pages 15-17):

https://www.skagitcounty.net/PublicWorksFerryReplacement/Documents/BUILD_Grant%20Application_Website%208.8.18.pdf

Here is a link to how Washington State Ferry System seeks opinions of their stakeholders prior to implementing a 4.25% rate increase:

<https://wstc.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-0621-BP9a-WSF-FareSettingProcess.pdf>

Washington State Ferry Riders Opinion Group:

<https://wstc.wa.gov/programs/ferry-riders-opinion-group/>

Attached is a link to what the federal government recommends for public outreach for all Federal Highway Programs:

https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2023-11/Promising%20Practices%20for%20Meaningful%20Public%20Involvement_2023Update_FINAL.pdf

Emergency Helicopter Insurance Links:

Life Flight

<https://www.lifeflight.org/>

Airlift NW

<https://www.uwmedicine.org/airliftnw>

2023 KPFF RATE STUDY

https://www.skagitcounty.net/PublicWorksFerry/Documents/230511_Guemes%20Ferry%20Rate%20Study%20Report.pdf

