

Current WSF Fares:

The goals of any WSF fare program are to generate adequate revenue (e.g. 70% of operating costs), to maximize vessel capacity by encouraging the use of smaller vehicles and off-peak travel where possible, to be easily implemented without impacting ferry operations, and to provide incentives for frequent users of the system (e.g. pre-paid ticket books, etc).

The current system provides a single fare for each route for "standard vehicles" (less than 20' in length and less than 7'6" in height), with higher fares during the summer period (the peak-season surcharge), and Incentives for frequent riders in the form of discounted frequent-rider books (which also avoid the peak-season surcharge). Fares for longer/taller vehicles are proportionally higher.

The current WSTC proposal for an additional small-car fare is billed as a first step towards encouraging folks to leave their behemoth-class SUV at home and take a smaller car instead. There are relatively few cars that fit the proposed 14' cutoff, so the benefit will be minimal. But more importantly, choosing a limit of 14' minimizes the impact of the program on the toll booths. And there is little prospect that the program can be expanded without some way to quickly measure vehicle length, so this is likely a first step without a second.

Another aspect of the WSTC proposal is to change the 20' cutoff for a standard vehicle to 22', to avoid tollbooth conflicts. This is contrary to the goal of encouraging smaller cars, but highlights the difficulty of implementing a length-based fare without a means to quickly and accurately measure vehicle length.

What is proposed here is to leave the current fare structure in place unchanged (except possibly for the 22' change), and replace the current frequent-rider incentive (multi-ride tickets) with a new length-based fare schedule, all based on readily-available technologies: tape-measures and some additions to the EFS system.

While technology to measure vehicle length would be an ideal solution, it apparently doesn't exist in a form that can be readily implemented. Tape-measures work fine, but are slow. However, by focusing the length-based fares on frequent riders, there is an opportunity to measure each vehicle just once, rather than once per trip. And realistically, encouraging frequent riders to use smaller vehicles achieves most of the goal, because commuters and folks on day-trips are much more likely to be able to choose a different car than a family on vacation.

Proposed Length-based fare structure:

The current fare structure would stay in place, with the current fare categories for 0-20' (or 22'), 20-30' etc., plus the current summer premiums. A general fare increase for this structure would be needed to offset the incentive-pricing for smaller vehicles described below. (This is a characteristic of any program that encourages smaller vehicles).

The frequent-rider tickets would then be replaced by a new "frequent rider" fare structure which is based on the length of vehicle. Six or eight length categories would be established, for example less than 10' (smart-car and 3-wheeled/sidecar motorcycles), 10-13, 13-15, 15-16, 16-18, 18-20, 20-25, or whatever. The categories are arbitrary and can be selected based on research of vehicles in general use. A larger number of categories will be seen as more equitable-- no one wants to be half an inch over the cutoff-- but at some point a larger number of categories begins to impact toll-booth operations.

To participate in this frequent-rider fare program, each vehicle must have a windshield sticker, color-coded and bar-coded with the length category. There would be a fee associated with the sticker to cover costs and focus the use of the program to frequent riders. These stickers could be purchased at a WSF ticket agent during non-peak times, or from other designated sellers. The agent would measure the car (or look it up), collect the fee and affix the sticker to the windshield. Since the stickers would be color-coded and imprinted with the length category (and perhaps the selling agency), auditing would be trivial.

The fare for a 16-18' vehicle, or whatever category best represents an average car, would be about the same as the current less-than-20' fare. Smaller length categories would carry a proportionally lower fare, and larger categories carrying a proportionally higher fare. Light trucks over 20' (up to 22 or 25') would also be eligible, and would pay substantially less than the current summer fares in the 20-30' category.

These length-based fares will also be tied to a flexible EFS ticket: Rather than being coded for a certain destination/fare, the EFS tickets would simply be dollar-value tickets, tied to a credit card. Suppose that you have a 16-18' vehicle going to Lopez: Zap the ticket past the scanner, the agent eyeballs or scans the windshield sticker, counts the passengers, and EFS deducts the corresponding amount from the ticket. Ticket goes empty? Charge the card for a refill. Fare card but no length sticker? Too bad, pay the regular price (with summer premium) or go park over there and wait for an agent. Same agents, same readers, no major changes other than a few software mod's to EFS.

Alternately, the program could be structured to allow the direct use of a credit-card rather than a fare ticket. For transactions under \$100 no signature is generally required and the transaction could be almost as quick as scanning an EFS ticket. A dollar-based ESF ticket works with the current scanners however, and would be better suited for the island terminals.

So casual visitors would see the same system they do now, albeit with a moderately higher fare. Regular riders who want to take advantage of the length-based fares would need to pay for a sticker and get a fare-card. Once that is done then owners of the most common sized 16-18' vehicles would pay about the same as they do currently with frequent-rider books, and owners of smaller cars would pay less. Light trucks over 20' would also be eligible, and would pay fares that are substantially less than current summer fares. Families with multiple cars may choose to only purchase a sticker for the shortest—where the savings are the greatest—and pay the normal fares for the larger vehicles. Or, they might decide to purchase a sticker for each car, and avoid the summer surcharge.

And the frequent-rider books go away, because they aren't flexible enough. The current frequent rider program offers a small discount over winter fares, and avoids the summer fares. The length-based program would do the same, and for most folks the fares would be about the same as a frequent-rider card. The sticker cost would be high enough to cover the agent costs, and high enough to discourage occasional riders-- perhaps somewhere in the \$50 range.

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