



Sidney-Anacortes Ferry Privatization Survey

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Introduction

The SJC EDC conducted an online survey of usage of the Sidney-Anacortes ferry route and opinions regarding privatization. We conducted this survey to gain information about factors such as usage of the ferry by residents of the affected communities, and sentiment regarding privatization. This is our preliminary analysis of the survey responses.

Major findings were as follows:

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1. A large fraction of respondents used the Sidney ferry for reasons other than or in addition to leisure travel. This is significant because if people depend on the route for business, family, or other critical reasons, a change in route or substantial increase in fares may pose a significant hardship. If the route moved to a new set of ports in other communities, those communities are not likely to have the family or business ties already in place. Whereas for leisure travelers the loss to one community would be balanced by a gain for another community if the route were to change, the harms due to loss of family or business ties would not be balanced.
2. The vast majority of people strongly preferred that the route be retained by WSF. We found that this could not be accounted for by misinterpretation of the questions or by how the survey was delivered.
3. There was strong interest in this survey. With fairly limited investment, we obtained over 800 responses, most of which were from affected communities.

Methodology

The survey was conducted as an online form (Google Forms) with an introduction that laid out background information (Appendix 1) based on EDC's understanding of the facts. The EDC aimed to present the background information and questions neutrally. Background information was presented to make sure respondents understood the constraints on operators.

Two yes-no questions (questions 4 & 6) were designed with the goal of getting applicants to express an opinion about the two alternatives under consideration – the existing WSF operation of the Sidney-Anacortes ferry, with a stop in Friday Harbor, or privatization of the ferry from WA to Vancouver Island, which may involve a change in ports – rather than providing their own vision. We hoped that the pairing of these questions would help us to a) assess response error rates because they were essentially opposite questions, and b) reduce biasing effects of wording by making them mirror each other.

To get insight into the issues that concerned people and alternative options that people might prefer to the two options we gave, we also asked for comments. A sample of these comments were used to examine whether people were interpreting the questions as we intended. However, deeper analyses of issues has not been done in this preliminary analysis.

The survey was announced as follows. We sent a newsletter to the EDC mailing lists of ~680 people, receiving 45 unique clicks on the form (based on MailChimp data). We sent a press release to San Juan County news outlets, the Lopez, Orcas, and San Juan Island Chambers of Commerce, the San Juan Islands Visitors Bureau, and the Anacortes Chamber of Commerce. The survey announcement was redistributed by at least the Orcas Island Chamber of Commerce and Orcas Issues, the San Juan Journal, and Islands Weekly. We posted on our Facebook page and ran a Facebook ad (boosted post; 57 clicks) focusing on Anacortes. We attempted to contact the Anacortes Chamber of Commerce, but did not hear back.

The survey was announced on August 20th, 2020. Because over the first two weeks many fewer responses (~50) came from Anacortes than from Friday Harbor/San Juan Island (the other stop on the US side of the Sidney-Anacortes ferry run) we placed a boosted post targeting a 5 mile radius including Anacortes on Saturday – Sunday, September 5th- 6th. The survey was closed at 9AM on September 9th.

Survey results were analyzed to gain insight on a) geography of responses, b) ferry usage, c) preferences (for/against privatization) and to check that a) respondents interpreted questions as intended, b) and distribution methods did not skew results.

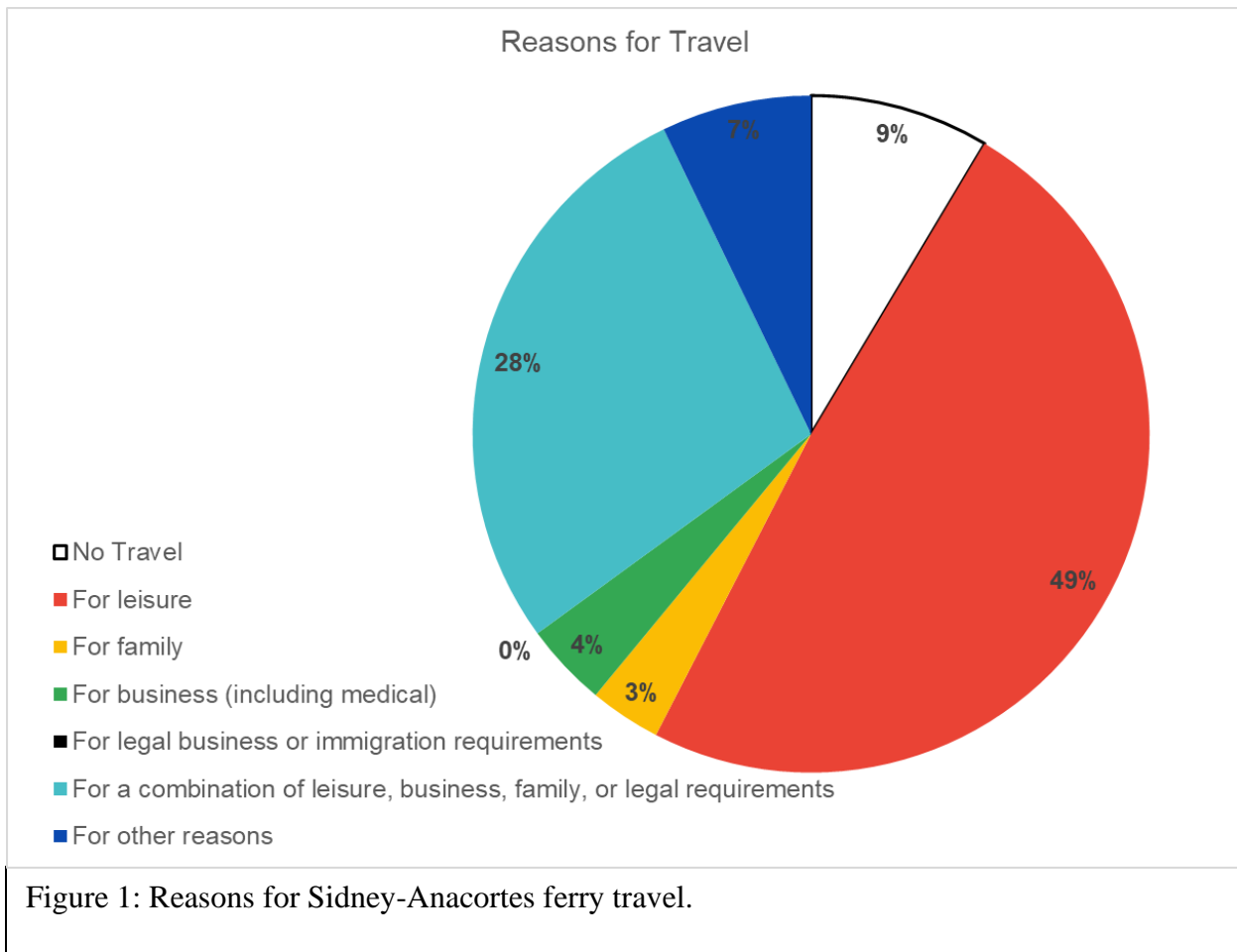
Results

Geography of responses

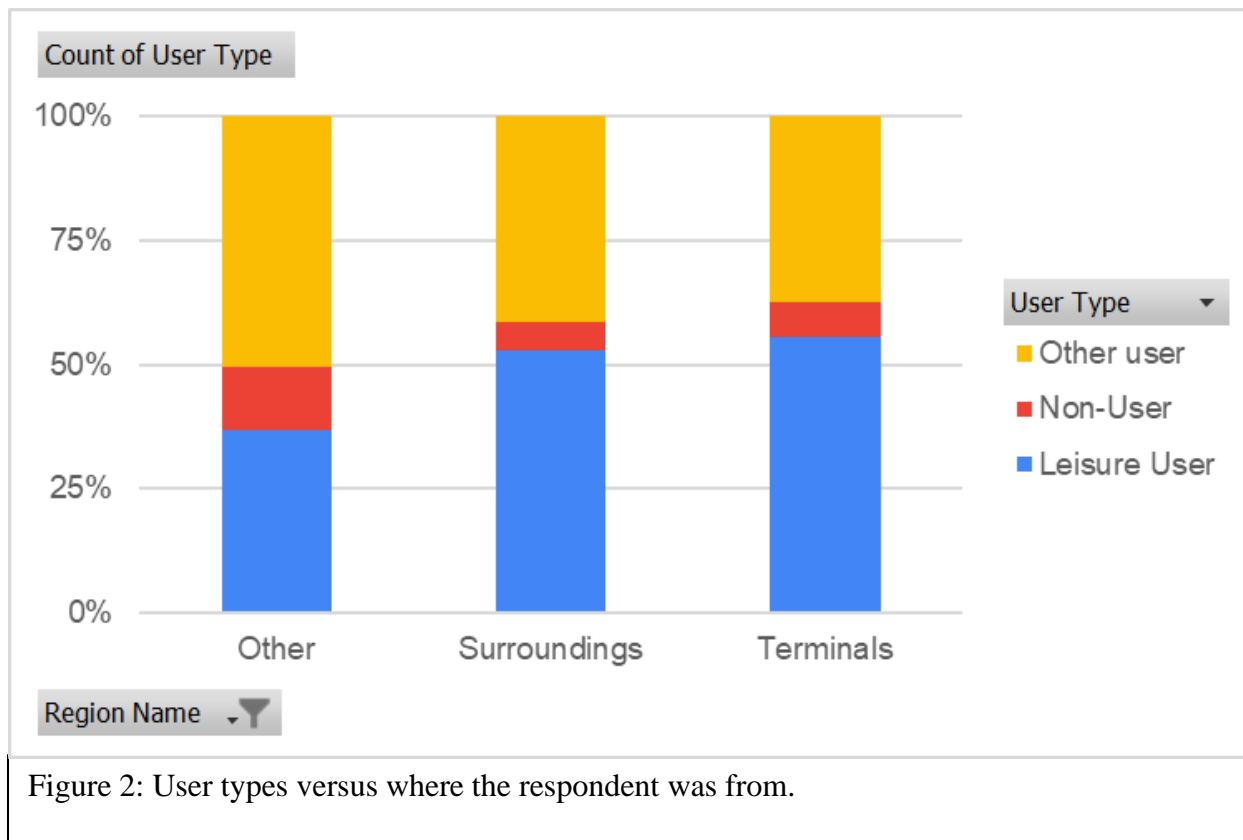
We received a total of 851 responses. The geographic area was broken down as follows. “Terminals” (357 responses) included zip codes 98250 (San Juan Island/Friday Harbor; 216 responses) and 98221 (Anacortes; 141 responses). “Surroundings” (235 responses) included zip codes from the rest of San Juan and Skagit Counties (excluding San Juan Island and Anacortes) plus zip codes from Island County. “Other” (259 responses) included all other zip codes, of those 11 came from outside of Washington State and 248 came from within Washington state, primarily in the Puget Sound area.

Ferry Usage

Most respondents (81%) had used the Sidney-Anacortes ferry, and 42% of respondents had used the route for reasons other than or in addition to leisure travel (Figure 1). Respondents were grouped by reason for travel as “non-user” (answered “no” on question asking whether they had used the Sidney-Anacortes route), “leisure user” (specified leisure as their reason for travel), or “other user” if they indicated family, business, legal, or other reasons in addition to or instead of leisure as reasons for travel on the route.



Proportions of different user types were similar across geographies (Figure 2).



Preferences

The vast majority of respondents indicated that they wanted WSF to retain the Sidney-Anacortes route, and not to privatize the route. While 89% responded “yes” that they wanted the Sidney ferry to be operated by WSF through existing ports (question 4), only 9% responded “yes” that they wanted the Sidney ferry run to be run by a private company, potentially through other ports (question 6).

These preferences were similar for all three geography regions considered (Figure 3) and all user types (Figure 4).

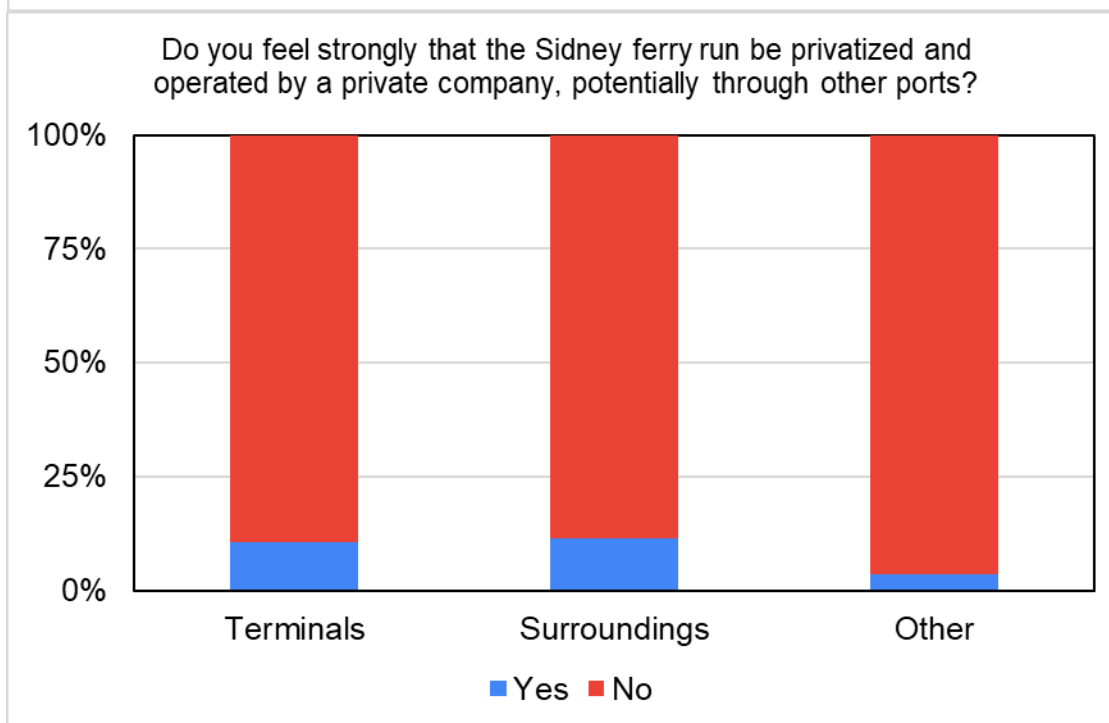
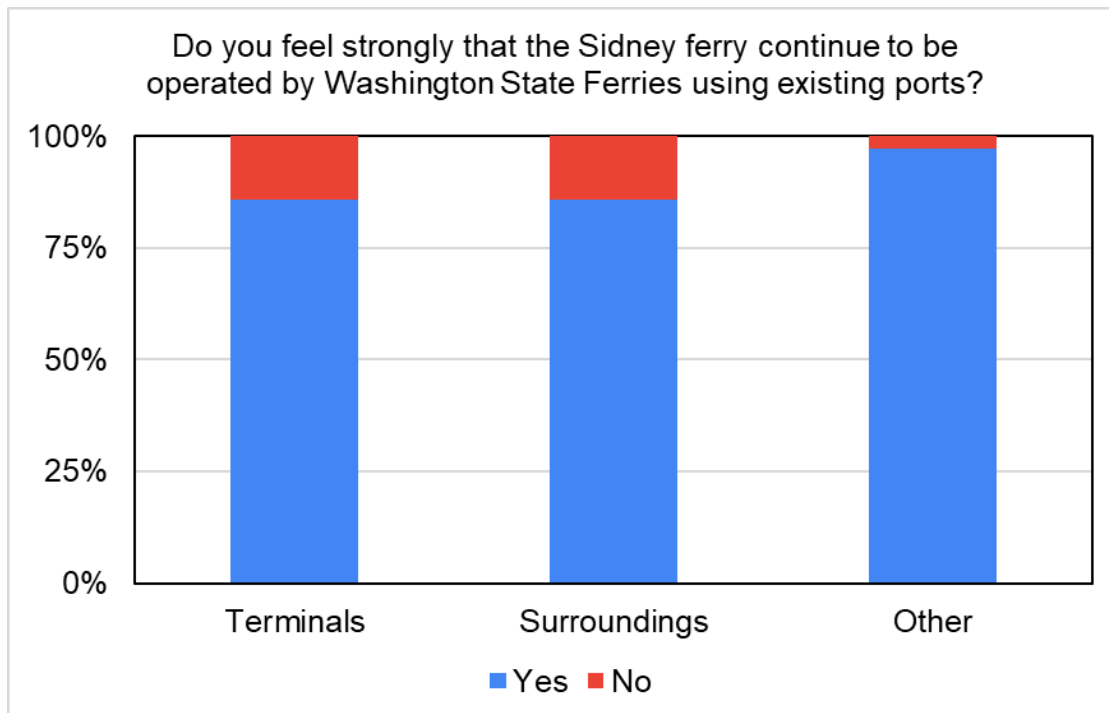


Figure 3: Preferences for WSF to maintain the route (top) vs private operator (bottom), split by where the respondent was from.

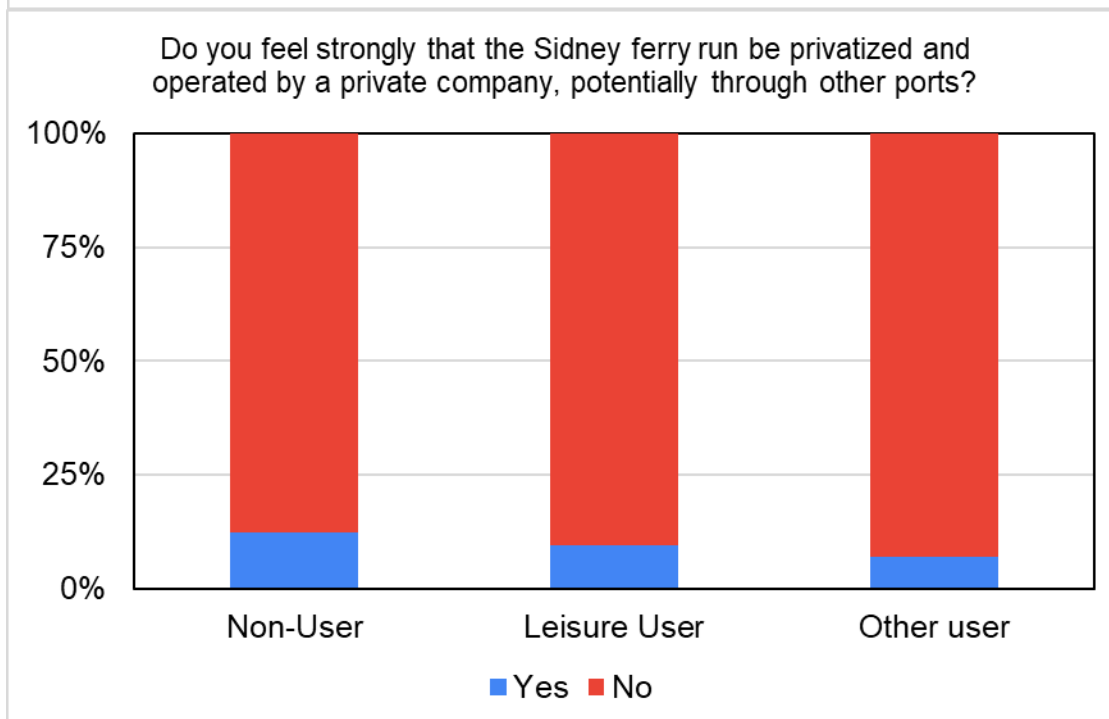
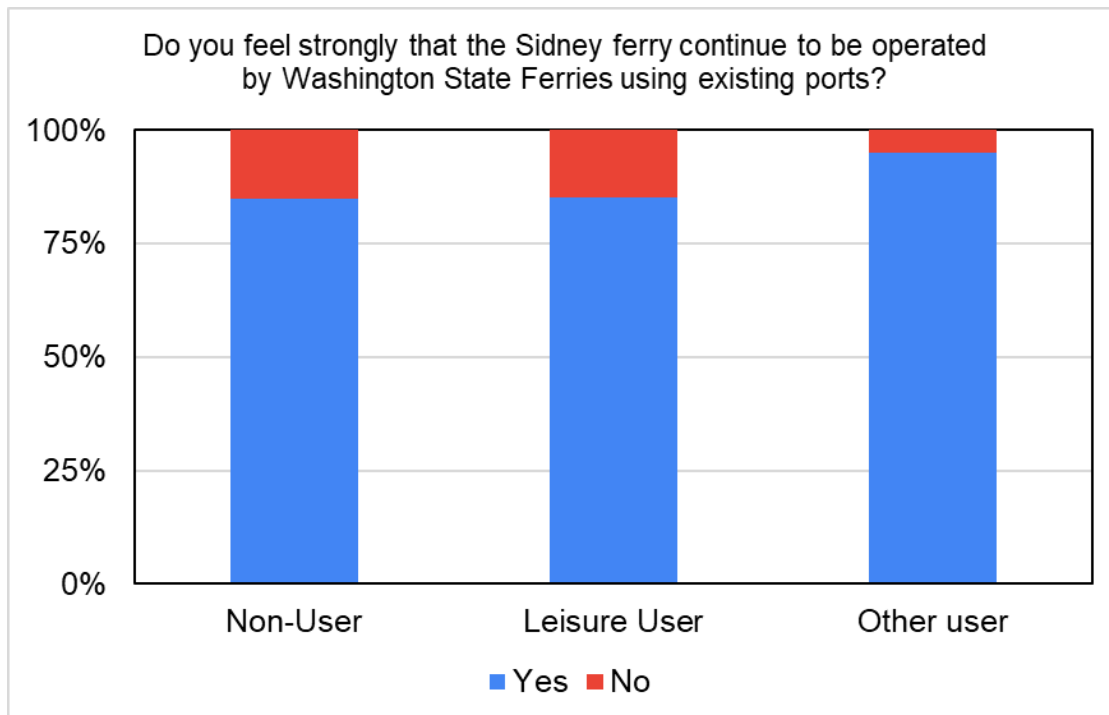


Figure 4: Preferences for WSF to maintain the route (top) vs private operator (bottom), split by how/whether the respondent used the Sidney-Anacortes ferry.

Consistency of Responses

We examined survey responses to make sure that unintended interpretation of the questions did not skew our conclusions. The proportion of misreadings appear to have been too small to affect the conclusions.

One obvious potential error is people interpreting questions differently from what was expected or intended. To look at this, I asked how many people answered “yes” that they favored WSF retaining the run (question 4), and answered “yes” that a private operator should take over (question 6). These responses are likely to be either a marking error or respondent who read the question differently than we intended (an interpretation error; but see below).

Only 4% of people marked “yes” to both questions. Assuming the same error numbers in all categories, that would give a total error rate of ~8%. This is much smaller than the observed level of preference.

It is possible that someone might want a private operator running a parallel route, and WSF continuing the current route, or want some public-private hybrid. Such a person might answer “yes” to both questions, making the error rate lower. A strong desire to maintain the run but no preference as to type of operator might also lead to a “yes-yes” response; however, that would still be an unintended interpretation of the question.

To look at this further, I quickly categorized responses based on the text comments (questions 5, 7, and 8. I all responses who provided comments and answered yes to both questions 4 and 6, or answered no to both questions, and subsamples of those who answered “yes” to one question and “no” to the other. Subsamples were taken by filtering to those who provided comments, and then taking every 25th (yes-no) or every 2nd response (no-yes) to give 19 to 17 responses for each group.

In all except the “yes-yes” category, in which I classified 63% as having interpreted the questions differently than intended, the vast majority of comments indicated that people read the questions as intended. Most importantly, in the largest group, which indicated favoring WSF retention of the Sidney-Anacortes route, only 5% had comments that conflicted with how they answered the yes-no questions based on our intended meaning (26% of those with comments could not be classified in this manner).

Effects of distribution method

We examined survey responses to make sure that effects of distributing through an online form would not have a strong enough effect to alter our conclusions.

Our distribution channels -- newsletter, EDC Facebook, Facebook ad in Anacortes, press release distributed by Chambers of Commerce and Visitors Bureau in SJC and by local papers -- are not likely to be biased toward favoring one option over another: they were aimed at getting as many people as possible, but are skewed towards the business community.

However, people could forward the survey to other people who they expect share their opinions. This means that the data are not statistically independent. The effect of this is (more or less) to reduce the effective sample size. Therefore, we can get an idea of the likelihood that our conclusions are skewed by figuring out the minimum sample size that would be sufficient to detect a preference in the population. Although it is likely that a few people spread the survey a lot, and others do not, this analysis should still be a good starting point.

If there was a 50-50 split in preferences among our target population and we picked 10 people at random, there would be less than a 5% chance that 9 of them would favor one option. Therefore, the effect of people passing the survey to friends would have to be so strong that it reduces our effective sample size from 851 people to <10 people. This seems highly unlikely given the multiple channels we used to distribute the survey.

Even though this is a quick-and-dirty way to look at this potential skewing effect, it seems clear that it is not sufficient to account for the observed preference.

Conclusions

The vast majority of those who live in near the Sidney-Anacortes ferry route are opposed to privatization. In addition, many users of the route use it for family, business, or other purposes that may not be easily transferred to routes going through other ports. These users might also be burdened if there were price increases.

Our conclusions appear robust to potential sources of error such as unintended interpretations of our wording or skewing based on people sharing the survey with others who have similar opinions.

We have not yet looked at the specific issues of concern, nor have we thoroughly examined comments for a desire for other options. Some concerns that showed up (not necessarily leaning one way or the other regarding privatization) included effects on whales, fare prices, travel to family, reliability, and effects on other routes. Some options people mentioned may fall under the concept of having both a public and a private operator, some sort of public-private partnership, or privatization but with constraints on price, vessels, or ports.

Appendix 1:

Survey text is copied below, including the introduction, questions and response options, and footnote. Text was written by Victoria Compton, EDC director, and reviewed by EDC staff.

The Joint Transportation Committee of the Washington State Legislature is conducting a study exploring privatization of the Sidney ferry run. The San Juan County Economic Development Council and their partners would like to hear opinions from regional users of the ferry and stakeholders.

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Background: The Washington State Legislature has directed the Joint Transportation Committee to analyze the feasibility of privatizing ferry service to Canada, which currently connects Sidney, BC and Anacortes, WA, with a stop in Friday Harbor, WA.

Currently nearly 20% of the run includes freight and passenger vehicle transportation to San Juan Island; however, the Federal Jones Act and international SOLAS requirements make it very difficult, if not impossible, for any current private operators to include a stop in Friday Harbor.

The ferry run brings an estimated \$30 million in payroll and \$126 million in spending to our region, associated with over 1000 jobs (Hovee and Dennis, 2007). WSF vessels operate at lower speeds – which may be safer and less noisy – than the vessels proposed by private operators. While the increased speed might impact marine life (Joy, et al., 2019), we do not have information about factors (routes, noise levels, slowdowns) that might mitigate or amplify impacts.

Potential benefits of privatization include allowing Washington State Ferries to support other runs in our region and farther south in Puget Sound, and a private company might be able to serve a Vancouver Island run more effectively, but possibly through a port not located in our region.

The EDC is interested in learning opinions on this concept from residents of our region. Please take a few minutes to answer the following survey - thank you.

Questions 1: What is your zipcode?

Text answer.

Question 3: Have you taken a trip to Sidney, BC on the Washington State Ferry run?

Options: No; Yes, for leisure; Yes, for family; Yes, for business (including medical); Yes, for legal business or immigration requirements; Yes, for a combination of leisure, business, family, or legal requirements; Yes, for other reasons

Question 4: Do you feel strongly that the Sidney ferry continue to be operated by Washington State Ferries using existing ports?

Options: Y/N

Question 5: Comments on whether it is important for the Sidney ferry to continue to be operated by Washington State Ferries.

Text answer.

Question 6: Do you feel strongly that the Sidney ferry run be privatized and operated by a private company, potentially through other ports?

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Options: Y/N

Question 7: Comments on whether it is important for the Sidney ferry to be privatized.

Text answer.

Question 8: Do you have any other comments?

Text answer.

Notes and References:

- Hovee, E.D., and Dennis, P. (2007). "Economic & Fiscal Benefits of the Anacortes to Sidney B.C. Ferry." prepared for the Economic Development Alliance of Skagit County. Cited in Allison, J. (2020, Feb). "Potential loss of Anacortes ferry 'devastating to this community' mayor says", Skagit Valley Herald (https://www.goskagit.com/news/local_news/potential-loss-of-ferry-a-concern-in-anacortes/article_87fc5ada-7bd2-5eb4-8675-7998da0c5288.html). Region studied includes Island, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish, and Whatcom Counties.
- Joy, R. et al. (2019). "Potential Benefits of Vessel Slowdowns on Endangered Southern Resident Killer Whales." *Frontiers in Marine Science* 6:344. doi: 10.3389/fmars.2019.00344