Ferry Tolling Implementation

Phase II

Public Comment Summary

Public Comment Period
October 9–23, 2026

Executive Summary

Phase II public input focused on resident and student exemptions, priority boarding, economic impacts, toll logistics and feasibility, opposition to tolling, alternative proposals, and potential ridership declines and route risks.

These findings provide NCDOT with additional public input to consider as ferry tolling implementation planning continues.

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1. Outreach Summary and Purpose

The N.C. Department of Transportation (NCDOT) conducted a second phase of public input to gather feedback on proposed ferry toll rates and the methodology used to develop them. The online comment period was held from October 9 through October 23, 2026.

The outreach was intended to:

- Present the proposed toll rates and methodology for public review.
- Gather feedback on how the proposed rates could affect residents, students, workers, businesses, property owners and visitors.
- Identify concerns regarding resident and student exemptions, priority boarding, economic impacts, toll logistics and feasibility, and potential effects on ridership and ferry service.
- Create a documented public engagement record for consideration as NCDOT continues tolling implementation planning.

2. Format and Outreach Method

Online Comment Format

Participants were invited to submit comments during the online comment period. Phase II focused on collecting public feedback regarding the proposed ferry toll rates and methodology.

The comment opportunity allowed participants to:

- Comment on the proposed rates for individual ferry routes.
- Comment on proposed toll methodology.
- Provide feedback on requested exemptions, discounts or reduced rates for specific groups.
- Identify potential effects on residents, students, businesses, tourism and ferry ridership.
- Ask questions about toll collection, operating costs, revenue and implementation.
- Recommend alternative toll structures or funding approaches.

Comments were reviewed and organized into recurring themes. Because individual comments could address more than one issue, theme frequency counts are non-exclusive and should not be interpreted as the number of unique respondents expressing a particular concern.

3. Overview of Comments

Comment Period and Participation

The Phase II comment period was open from October 9 through October 23, 2026. During that period, NCDOT received 54 comments regarding the proposed ferry toll rates and methodology.

Comments addressed a range of issues related to implementation, including exemptions for residents and students, priority boarding, potential economic impacts, toll logistics and feasibility, opposition to tolling, alternative approaches, and concerns about potential ridership declines and risks to ferry routes.

General Themes

Comments reflected concerns about how the proposed toll rates and methodology could affect residents, students, workers, businesses, property owners, visitors and ferry-dependent communities. The recurring themes included:

- Requests for exemptions or reduced rates for residents and students.
- Preservation of priority boarding for residents, vendors and other essential users.
- Potential effects on tourism, local businesses and community economies.
- Questions about toll collection, operating costs, financial feasibility and projected revenue.
- Opposition to implementing tolls on routes that currently operate without them.
- Alternative proposals, including differentiated rates, annual passes, round-trip discounts and other funding approaches.
- Concerns that lower ridership could affect future ferry service or place lower-volume routes at risk.

The review identified resident and student exemptions as the most frequently mentioned theme, with 19 mentions, followed by priority boarding needs with 16, economic impact concerns with 13, and toll logistics and feasibility with 11. Opposition to tolling received six mentions, alternative proposals received five, and ridership decline and route risk received four.

Community concerns and potential impacts varied by route and location, indicating that implementation considerations may differ among ferry-dependent communities. Because individual comments could address multiple topics, these categories are non-exclusive and reflect coded mentions rather than unique respondents.

Ranked Comment Themes

1. Strong Opposition to Implementing New Ferry Tolls

Many commenters oppose tolling entirely, arguing that ferries function like public highways and should remain free. Concerns include:

- Increased financial burden on residents already facing economic challenges.
- Fear that tourism and local commerce will decline if visitors choose not to pay tolls.
- Assertions that state funding rather than user tolls should cover ferry operations and vessel replacements.
- Belief that the legislative decision to mandate tolls was made without adequately considering community impacts.

2. Exemptions Requested for Local Residents, Students, and Workers

A dominant theme is the request for exemptions or reduced tolls for those who rely on ferries for daily life. Specific groups repeatedly identified include:

- Ocracoke and Knotts Island residents, for whom ferries serve as essential roadways.
- Students, including student drivers who use the ferry to attend middle and high school.
- Low-income residents, seniors, and government/emergency services vehicles.
- Residents of counties where the ferry originates (e.g., Currituck, Beaufort).

3. Concerns About Economic Impacts

Commenters highlight several potential negative economic impacts:

- Reduced tourism, especially for Ocracoke, Cedar Island, and Swan Quarter routes.
- Declining revenue for businesses like golf courses, restaurants, and shops due to fewer visitors.
- Fear that high tolls on less-traveled rural routes (Aurora–Bayview, Minnesott Beach–Cherry Branch) may cause ridership collapse and eventual route closure.

4. Issues Related to System Equity and Access

Many comments describe tolling as unfair or inequitable, citing:

- Residents' inability to choose alternate routes.
- Comparisons to free bridge infrastructure available elsewhere.
- The disproportionate burden placed on coastal communities versus inland counties.

5. Requests for Resident and Vendor Priority Boarding

Across several entries, especially from Ocracoke stakeholders, there is strong concern about maintaining or improving priority boarding, noting:

- Long wait times that already disrupt residents' ability to access medical care, supplies, and employment.
- Vendors needing priority to keep island businesses viable.
- Assertions that tolls alone do not solve wait-time problems.

6. Questions About Toll Logistics, Feasibility, and Revenue Justification

Many commenters ask for clarification on how tolling will work and whether it is financially justified. Common questions include:

- Will toll revenue meaningfully offset vessel replacement costs?
- Will collecting fees delay boarding and require added staff?
- Can residents purchase commuter passes, and at what cost?
- Will there be a study evaluating economic impacts before tolls begin?

7. Concerns That Tolls Will Reduce Ridership and Trigger Service Cuts

Multiple commenters worry that:

- High toll prices will reduce use of certain ferry routes.
- Lower ridership could jeopardize future funding and lead to route elimination.
- Some believe reducing ferry service is an unstated legislative intent.

8. Suggestions for Alternative Approaches

Commenters propose several possible alternatives:

- Charge tourists more while reducing fees for residents.
- Implement tiered or graduated toll structures, round-trip discounts, or low-cost annual passes.
- Consider eliminating corporate tax cuts instead of increasing user costs.
- Add ferry runs or improve scheduling to reduce congestion before implementing any toll.

Appendix A. PublicInput.com Final Report Summary

1	Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, I ask that you not impose tolls for the ferries that don't already have them. Local businesses and people will suffer when visitors opt not to spend money to get to an additional location to spend more money. The economy is terrible and any additional expenses for travelers will negatively impact the overall economy of North Carolina. There should be enough money in the NCDOT budget to maintain the existing infrastructure without adding another burden to those trying to travel around the Outer Banks. Thank you for your consideration.
2	I for one will no longer play golf at Minnesott Beach. If I have to pay an extra $7 to play golf each and every time I will not be playing any longer. I will play elsewhere. I'm sure I am not the only one and the golf club will lose much revenue due to this.
3	Will funds from sell of vessels, mechanical components, electronics etc. supplement the tolls to fund ferry replacement? Will collecting tolls slow the boarding process? Will additional NCDOT staff be required to collect individual tolls or Will existing ferry personnel be expected to perform this function further delaying boarding? Will possession of a 20 county “commuter pass” eliminate need to pay tolls? Since the tolls only fund 80% of ferry replacement cost, will taxpayer funding make up the difference? What does estimated revenue refer to? Is it the tolls alone or tolls plus 20 county commuter passes? Do all residents in the 20 coastal counties have to buy commuter passes? What will the estimated revenue from tolls be used to offset in the state budget? This is essentially a tax and these toll funds will replace funds previously used to fund ferry replacement cost. Presently, how often are ferries replaced? If tolls allow more frequent replacement, maintenance funding should be reduced further freeing up funding for non NCDOT related tax payer funded expenditures. Will residents outside the 20 coastal counties be permitted to purchase commuter passes? I know a resident of Martin county that own rental property on Ocracoke Island.
4	If ferry use decreases from present levels due to implementation of tolls, will tolls be reduced to increase use or will toll rates be increased to make up the difference ? How will hardship on ferry riders on Pamlico and Neuse River ferries that work at the Phosphate plant in Aurora NC be minimized?
5	The permanent residents of Ocracoke should not pay tolls as it is their only way on/off island. As a 'tourist' I would gladly pay a toll should I want to visit Ocracoke
6	I have not been provided clear instructions regarding student drivers who rely on the ferry to get to and from school. Particularly the Knotts Island and Currituck ferry. Students who drive should not have to pay to attend school. We pay taxes for a reason. I’m asking that you consider with a high school student ID that students be exempt from the ferry fees

7	The amount for Bayview is unrealistic. It will cost more to collect it than it will generate. I recommend $1 or $2 collected by someone already on ferry. At least then you will be making some profit instead of losing money. Either that or build a bridge. I live here and a toll will keep me from using service in part of my county- Beaufort.
8	If you are Currituck county resident, you should be able to use the ferry as you please free of charge. Its not fair to those who rely on the ferry for school and work. Personally I use the ferry to get to work where I make 9 dollars an hour, and I work 2 days a week, and I use it to get to school.
9	Rather than passing off another cost to North Carolinians, the legislature needs to pause upcoming decreases in the corporate income tax. Otherwise, in 2030 corporations will pay zero income taxes while North Carolinians (their employees) will pay income taxes and tolls on ferries so that they can commute to those corporations. The government needs to find a way to deliver services to its citizens instead of passing off the cost to them.
10	The Currituck/Knotts Island ferry needs to remain a free ferry. To get our students and their parents from the mainland schools to the Island, people literally have to travel through another state. Knotts Island is part of our county, and forcing these residents to pay to get to our mainland courthouse area is abhorrent. The state would have plenty of money if they taxed the wealthy.
11	Sell commuter passes to anyone who wants one, not just residents of the 21 named coastal counties. You'll get more revenues and most likely many will not use it to the full extent to achieve a discounted trip off the regular rate.
12	the toll on the Cedar Island and Swan Quarter route needs to be raised 10 dollars
13	I believe you are going to cause many people to not drive the shorter ferries because of the cost. It's always smarter to start with a lower fee and raise as needed. Especially since the ferries aren't running on any sort of a schedule anymore. I live right by the CB-M ferry landing and will be a pedestrian from now on and have someone pick me up on the other side.
14	The Knotts Island ferry and the Ocracoke to Swan Quarter ferry should be free of tolls for the island residents. They rely on the ferry as though it were a highway, their connection to the county mainland. The tolls collected from Knotts Island ferry probably will not cover the cost of paying toll collectors. The residents need that ferry to participate in their children's school events graces 6-12. Please reconsider.
15	I am a frequent. longtime out of State visitor and through the decades I have become friends with many Ocracoke residents. The residents vitally need Priority boarding. The ferry wait times are atrocious during the shoulder & summer seasons. The ferry is their only road to access medical, (especially Specialists) appointments, obtain supplies for their homes, businesses and for any off island needs. With Priority boarding it is already a 5-6+ hour day, adding extended ferry line wait times is, in my outsider opinion, an unconscionable lack of government protection of residents Right for access.
16	There needs to be priority for residents of Ocracoke on at least the Hatteras ferry. The toll is acceptable but should be subsided or waived for low income residents and seniors.

17	I feel that if you live in the county where the ferry is located the fee should be waived. For example, I live in Knotts Island the Currituck and Knotts Island ferry fee should be waived. However if I ride any other ferry I should pay. And the same for other residents with ferry's in their county. I feel like this is a decent compromise. Also if kids use the ferry for school transportation (even in their own vehicle) the fee should be waived
18	If it is inevitable and apparently it is that the Knotts Island / Currituck Ferry is going to have a toll placed on it, I implore the DOT to do the right thing by the students. Whereas this ferry was placed for the primary purpose of taking students to, and from please exempt all students from the toll. Regardless of school buses versus personal vehicles. If there are current county student, they should be EXEMPT! Yours already in a hardship place on families who have students involved after school activities with them having to drive around through Virginia after hours. Please do not add an additional burden to them. Better yet exempt the students and add an additional ferry run if need be.
19	I strongly oppose adding tolls to the Hatteras–Ocracoke ferry and urge state leaders to preserve resident priority access. For Ocracoke residents, the ferry is an essential transportation connection. Families depend on it for medical appointments, work, education, groceries, and services unavailable on the island. Residents should not face an additional financial barrier simply because their route home crosses water. The Ferry Division's own analysis raises serious concerns about this proposal. The recommended rates are projected to generate an average of $4.4 million annually, yet that amount would still fall short of the stated goal of funding 80% of one replacement vessel every four years. The Division also acknowledges that higher tolls could reduce ridership and make revenue less predictable. These findings suggest that tolling could impose lasting costs on ferry-dependent communities without providing a dependable solution to vessel replacement. Returning next fall to consider further increases adds uncertainty for households and businesses trying to plan ahead. Reliable vessels deserve stable public funding. Before imposing new tolls, the state should demonstrate why broader transportation funding cannot meet this need and publicly account for collection costs, expected net revenue, and potential effects on local businesses and essential travel. Resident priority access must also be explicitly protected. Residents need a dependable way to reach appointments, fulfill work and family responsibilities, and return home during periods of heavy visitor traffic. A discounted fare or commuter pass does not solve the separate problem of access: an affordable crossing is little help if a resident cannot board when needed. Because the toll requirement comes from state law, I urge the General Assembly to change that requirement and expressly protect resident priority boarding. I urge the Board of Transportation and NCDOT to support those changes. Ocracoke's transportation needs should be measured by the community's ability to live and function here—not solely by the revenue that can be collected at the ferry terminal.

20	I think the Hatteras Ferry should not be tolled. If it is tolled I think ALL property owners (both resident and non-resident) on Ocracoke should NOT have to pay the toll. It is not fair for anyone with property on Ocracoke to have to pay a toll to get to and from it. The priority pass should remain in place for Ocracoke residents.
21	Please implement a priority pass. Without one I fear the cost of living will go even higher. Essential goods and services could completely stop because it won't be worth it to the vendor. Residents need to be able to get to the doctor. That is critical to our community. Please keep funds local and consider adding more passenger ferries to keep the economy in a good place. Please consider using tolls to repair and replace ferries. Thank you
22	My question is about priority for residents and vendor priority passes. Will priority still be a thing for these 2 groups? Residents and those supplying the island must have priority. They cannot be stuck in line behind hundreds of visitors. Those visitors need residents to be able to get home to work the businesses they patronize and those businesses cannot function without vendors being able to supply them. Will vendor priority passes still be available for purchase? Thank you!
23	I don’t really mind the toll although it seems vastly unfair that residents cannot get off the island without paying a toll. What we residents really NEED to keep is the priority pass.
24	G39J+G2P Knotts Island, North Carolina
25	Drive
26	For small rural routes where there is no tourism, this is highway robbery. Literally. If you wanted to close this ferry down locally, this is the way to do it. Locals will not be able to afford this and you most certainly will be closing this route and downsizing your staff. Congrats on an efficient destruction of a system that has worked since the 60s for free.
27	The proposed tolls for the Aurora-Bayview ferry are prohibitively expensive. Currently, if I were in New Bern or Bayboro and was wanting to go to Bath or Belhaven, I would most definitely use the ferry. If the toll is implemented, I would have serious reservations about using the ferry and would rather make the circuitous drive up through Chocowinity and Washington instead of forking over $7 each way for the standard vehicle fare. I don't doubt that there are other respondents who feel similarly. It is also quite conceivable that charging a toll on this particular route will dramatically reduce ridership, ultimately forcing NC DOT to terminate ferry service on this route to the detriment of not only Aurora and Bayview, but the surrounding region in general. But, perhaps, enacting such high fares is an ulterior motive on the part of the state legislature to gradually get NC DOT out of ferry transit altogether, at least on the less traveled ferry routes.
28	I believe residents of each county should not pay for the ferry they are tax paying residents of. I also believe all students riding for school should be free even in their own private vehicles. Charge the visitors not the county residents. I also believe if you are going to give state residents the option to buy an annual pass it should be a reasonable amount of $50 or less.

29	Will there be an economic impact study conducted given the limited implementation timeframe? so see what the effects of tolling on residents, local businesses, and tourism might be and if adjustments should be made? Given the limited implementation timeframe and lack of available land in locations such as Ocracoke, where will tolling employees work? these are remote locations near the ocean and sound with extreme weather. Since projected toll revenue falls considerably short of the funding needed for vessel replacement will tolls increase drastically after this first year or routes reduced to save vessel wear and tear?
30	No tolls! Ocracoke shores are already so highly regulated for fisherman, this will significantly impact the visitors from coming. Including me.
31	If you have to implement this toll, could you do a graduated rate structure so that residents could pay less? And/or have a cheaper rate for 2-way travel?
32	Currituck County residents should not have to pay tolls to get back and forth from Knotts Island, since they don't have any other means of transportation to commute for work or school.
33	The ferry system should be free to use. I assume the system will be going to an online registration system which is simply wasted taxpayer money, those systems cost money to operate. If the ferry system has value to the state, which I believe it does, it should be funded by the state as a whole. +
34	Charging a fee for some of these ferry routes will cause irrevocable harm. The shorter ferries, in particular the Hatteras-Ocracoke ferry will kill traffic for day use of the other island, for many people a twenty dollar round trip simply won't be worth it. On other ferries such as the Cherry Branch - Minnesott Beach ferry it will simply increase the likelihood that someone will be willing to simply make the drive through New Bern instead. People will still spend money, but fee ferries will change where people spend that money.
35	Student drivers in their own personal vehicles should be exempt from the tolls when traveling to and from school.
36	It’s a crock of BS when you have a politician from near the Charlotte area who pushed for these tolls on the free ferries. These ferries are the same as crossing a bridge to connect these coastal communities.
37	The students that drive to Currituck County schools should be exempt from having to pay the toll. The residents of Currituck county should also be exempt. Knotts Island residents that have children that play sports at Currituck School should get some sort of a break on the fee to ride. Some sports have practice every day, that's 35 dollars extra and then when the games start you also have to play to watch the game. That's a lot on these parents.

38	We are particularly concerned about the impact tolls could have on middle and high school students who rely on the Currituck-Knotts Island ferry route to travel to school and to participate in after-school activities, athletic programs, academic enrichment, and other educational opportunities. We also question the cost-benefit justification for implementing tolls on this route. The anticipated revenue must be weighed against the administrative costs of collecting tolls, the financial burden placed on residents, and the potential reduction in ridership. Most importantly, we fear that reduced ridership and the resulting financial pressures could ultimately place the ferry route at risk of elimination. The loss of this service would have significant consequences. The Currituck County Board of Commissioners remains opposed to implementing tolls but respectfully urges the adoption of the following measures to mitigate their impact: 1. Exempt student drivers traveling across ferry routes to attend secondary or post-secondary educational institutions. 2. Provide income-based exemptions for coastal county residents. 3. Link the commuter pass to an individual, allowing it to be used with any vehicle they drive rather than being assigned to a specific vehicle. 4. Maintain double and triple commuter pass options. 5. Allow passengers traveling solely as walk-ons to ride at no charge. 6. Maintain resident priority pass program. 7. Exempt all local, state, and federal government vehicles, including those used for emergency services and essential government operations. 8. If additional revenue or cost recovery is necessary, focus those efforts on non-resident and seasonal tourism traffic rather than residents who rely on ferries for daily transportation. We also support delaying implementation of the proposed tolls, at a minimum, until the State Auditor's Ferry Division Performance Audit has been reviewed and its findings considered.
39	High School students should not be charged when driving there vehicles to school. I believe the ferry was created for the schools. These kids don't need to be driving these back rds everyday. Not sure how it is now but not all the bus drivers have been safe ones last couple of years, check out the pick up and drop off lines at the schools. Its also our transportation to the Carolina side, we already pay enough in rising taxes. Not that anyone's comments have mattered this whole process was already in place before our thoughts were even considered. That's how the world works now !
40	Will a yearly pass be allowed for NRPO

41	I support the Board of Transportation resolution to delay implementation to allow the division sufficient time to develop a comprehensive implementation plan and do it right. I was hoping the new rates for the free ferries would be more reasonable, say $5 per normal (single) size vehicle. Why gouge the Ocracoke-Hatteras riders at $10 a clip?
42	This is acceptable for non residents but not for Ocracoke residents who use the Hatteras/Ocracoke ferry for daily living.
43	The continuation of the priority pass program is absolutely essential. Resident cannot be expected to wait for hours on top of having to pay to come and go
44	Non-resident property owners should be able to buy annual passes and have priority boarding because we pay the same level of tax as full-time residents. Maybe a tiered priority and annual pass system should be considered. Non-resident property owners should not be lumped in with the tourists. Thank you.
45	All non sound ferry tolls should be equal. What happens when tolling revenue does not meet expected revenue? Does the transportation budget provide money for ferry replacement?
46	While I appreciate that some toll or fee needs to be charged, these are still far too high. North Carolina residents already pay extremely high taxes for transportation and roads. This fee system will only further decrease, not increase, use of the ferry system. If fees must be charged it seems to me that half these amounts are more in line with what is appropriate. Not only that but tourism will also be effected given that those in RVs and Campers will be looking at a fairly hefty toll as well. This needs much more consideration before implementation.
47	Make the bicycle rider the same across all routes-
48	What is the status of Ocracoke residents having priority? Will that still be provided at the same cost being used now?
49	It is imperative that the Hatteras-Ocracoke ferry be available at no cost to year-round residents of Ocracoke Island and they should have a priority pass. As a non-resident homeowner I have no issues with the fees for anyone other than the residents of Ocracoke Island.
50	I oppose this proposal. It is outrageous that you would consider charging residents of the Outerbanks anything at all to use what is for them an essential state highway service. Ferries should be free for residents who depend on the system for survival. Tax tourists, tax non-residents - even those who own 2nd homes in affected communities. But adding $150 a year to the expenses of people barely scraping is simply not ok. Stop the insanity and raise luxury taxes, raise corporate taxes. Don't prop up bad economics on the back of those least able to support it.

51	Non Resident Property owners should be given the same priority as residents. We pay full property taxes while many residents given priority passes pay NO property taxes. Not fair. We are the main generator of income for Hyde County as a result of opening our homes to visitors to rent. In my case, we live here 7-8 months per year and are not considered residents. We have to leave the Island for Dental, Medical, Grocery trips, home repair issues and need priority, As well. Thank you for understanding.
52	Residents of ferry counties should NOT have to pay tolls for ferry use within their county. This creates a new hardship for residents just trying to get to work. Our property taxes, fuel taxes, highway use taxes, income taxes, and sales taxes deplete our dollars to nearly unsustainable levels and you guys want to saddle us with another tax. No thanks. We have been bled dry.
53	Recommend a reduced round-trip ticket for Hatteras-Ocracoke route to encourage day-trippers to Ocracoke. Recommend a dispensation for Ocracoke residents who have ongoing medical needs and must take the ferries regularly, especially if they are low-income. ; Recommend a $5 increase for vehicles (only vehicles) taking the Swan Quarter and Cedar Island ferries.
54	Ferry tolls are reasonable. Reinforce that $150 annual fee for residents is applicable across ALL routes, not that separate payments of $150 are required for each route if that is the case.