



Ferry Tolling Implementation

What We Heard Summary

**Public Engagement and Comment Period
August 17–September 14, 2026**

Executive Summary



Public input centered on affordability, service reliability, resident priority boarding, school access, pass eligibility and convenient payment options.

These findings will be considered as NCDOT develops toll-rate recommendations, operating procedures, customer-support plans and implementation communications.

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1. Outreach Summary and Purpose

The N.C. Department of Transportation (NCDOT) conducted public outreach to help inform statewide ferry tolling implementation. North Carolina law requires the N.C. Ferry Division to begin collecting tolls on all ferry routes by January 1, 2027. While the tolling requirement is established in law, NCDOT sought public input on the customer, community, operational and economic considerations that will help inform toll rates, payment options, passes, terminal operations, customer support and other implementation decisions.

The outreach was intended to:

- Explain the legislative requirements and implementation schedule.
- Distinguish between decisions already established by law and what remains under evaluation.
- Understand how ferry tolling could affect residents, commuters, students, businesses, visitors and ferry-dependent communities.
- Gather input about affordability, payment methods, passes, customer service, terminal operations and route-specific needs.
- Create a documented engagement record to present to the N.C. Board of Transportation for consideration in subsequent implementation planning.

In-Person Listening Sessions

Five public listening sessions were held in September 2026. All sessions were held from 6–8 p.m.

- September 1, 2026 — Washington: Beaufort County Community College
- September 2, 2026 — Grantsboro: Pamlico Community College's Delamar Center
- September 3, 2026 — Knotts Island: Knotts Island Elementary School
- September 8, 2026 — Hatteras: Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum
- September 9, 2026 — Ocracoke: Ocracoke School

Listening Session Attendance by Location

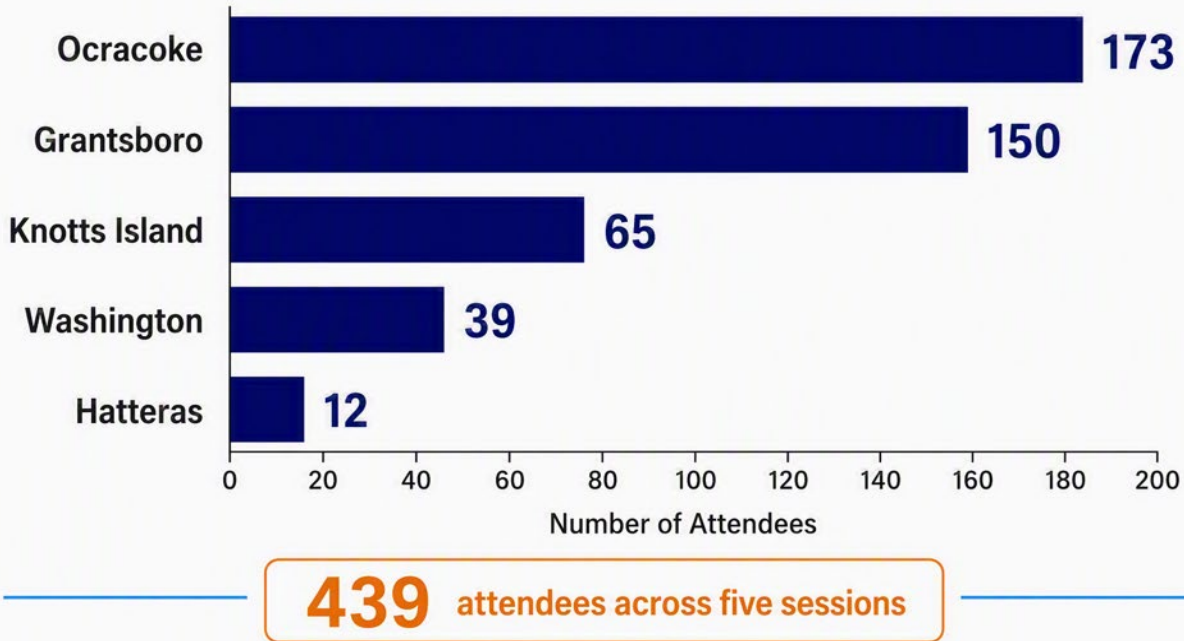


Figure 1. Listening session attendance by location.

Digital Engagement and Public Comment Opportunities

NCDOT provided multiple ways for residents, ferry users, businesses, stakeholders and visitors to learn about the project, ask questions and submit comments.

The project webpage served as the central source for project information, meeting details, FAQs, updates and comment opportunities. It included an embedded PublicInput.com survey using the same core questions presented during the listening sessions, allowing in-person and online feedback to be analyzed together. PublicInput.com also supported meeting sign-ins and digital comment collection throughout the engagement period.

In addition to the online survey, NCDOT established a project-specific email address and project hotline to provide additional opportunities for the public to ask questions, share concerns and submit comments. These options were intended to accommodate individuals who preferred direct communication or who may not have wished to participate through the online survey platform.

Online engagement activity generated substantial participation during the comment period, resulting in:

Online Engagement at a Glance



Figure 2. Online engagement activity during the comment period.

These figures summarize activity recorded on the online engagement platform.

The project also received 146 written comments through in-person and other submission methods, bringing the combined total to 1,311 online and written comments.

Together, the online engagement tools, project hotline, project email address and embedded website survey provided multiple access points for participation and helped ensure that community members could engage in the manner most convenient for them:

- Project webpage: ncdot.gov/divisions/ferry/Pages/ferry-tolls.aspx
- Survey: www.publicinput.com/ferry-tolling
- Email: ferry-tolling@publicinput.com
- Phone: **984-205-6615**, Project Code **10744**

These digital and direct-contact channels complemented the in-person listening sessions and supported participation throughout the engagement period.

2. Meeting Format and Outreach Methods

Listening Session Format

The meetings used a facilitated open-house format rather than a traditional public hearing. Participants could move through information stations, speak directly with project staff and subject-matter experts, submit written or online comments, and join optional facilitated

discussions. The format was designed to provide multiple ways to participate and create opportunities for a broader range of perspectives to be heard.

Meeting materials generally included:

- Sign-in and orientation information.
- Information explaining why ferry tolling is being implemented.
- The project timeline and Board decision process.
- Information about tolling implementation and the customer experience.
- Route-specific information.
- Printed comment forms.
- iPads providing access to the online survey.
- QR codes for participants who wished to submit comments from their own devices.
- Optional facilitated listening tables.
- Project staff and subject-matter experts available to answer questions.

Participants were encouraged to provide comments through multiple channels. The facilitated discussions explored how people use the ferry system, the effects tolling could have on travel and community access, payment preferences, service expectations, pass and account concerns, customer support, and actions NCDOT could consider during implementation.

Comments and discussion notes were organized using categories that included rates, payment methods, commuter and vendor passes, business impacts, tourism impacts, route operations, customer service, communications, terminal operations and equity concerns.

Advertisement and Notification Methods

The outreach strategy used in-person, digital, partner and customer communication channels. Planned methods included the project webpage, PublicInput.com, social media, terminal information, local government and community partner outreach, press releases and stakeholder briefings.

The advertisement period ran from August 17 through September 14, 2026. The first social media advertisements began on August 18.

Figure 3 summarizes advertisement and notification results.

Advertisement and Notification Results



Figure 3. Advertisement and notification results.

3. Overview of Comments

Comment Period and Participation

The public engagement and comment period began with the first advertisement on August 17 and continued through September 14, 2026. The first social media advertisements began on August 18. The in-person listening sessions were held from September 1 through September 9, while digital and written comment channels remained available throughout the broader engagement period.

Because participants could answer multiple survey questions, the 47,051 responses represent question-level submissions rather than unique participants.

The survey collected basic information from participants, such as their self-identified role in using the ferry system, and which routes they used most. Survey participants most often described themselves as residents or tourists and visitors. The Hatteras-Ocracoke vehicle route was selected by participants as the route used most often, followed by Swan Quarter-Ocracoke and Cherry Branch-Minnesott Beach. Because participants could select more than one answer, these totals represent selections rather than unique individuals.

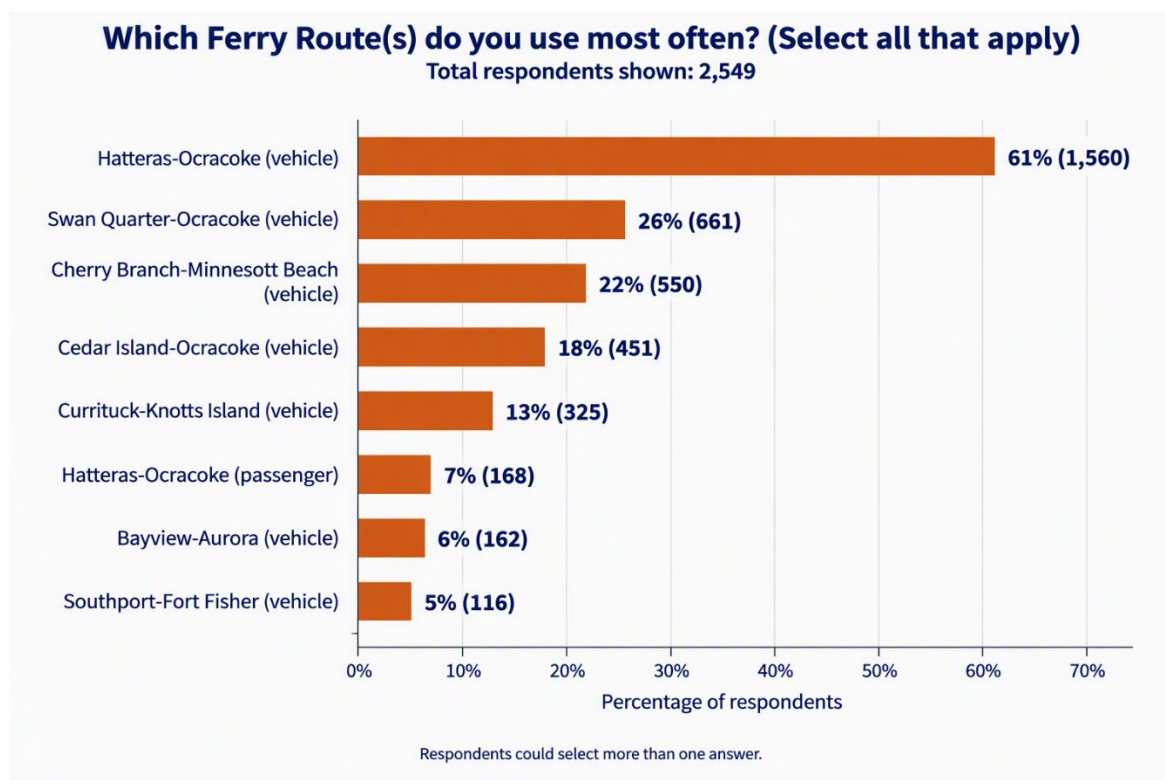
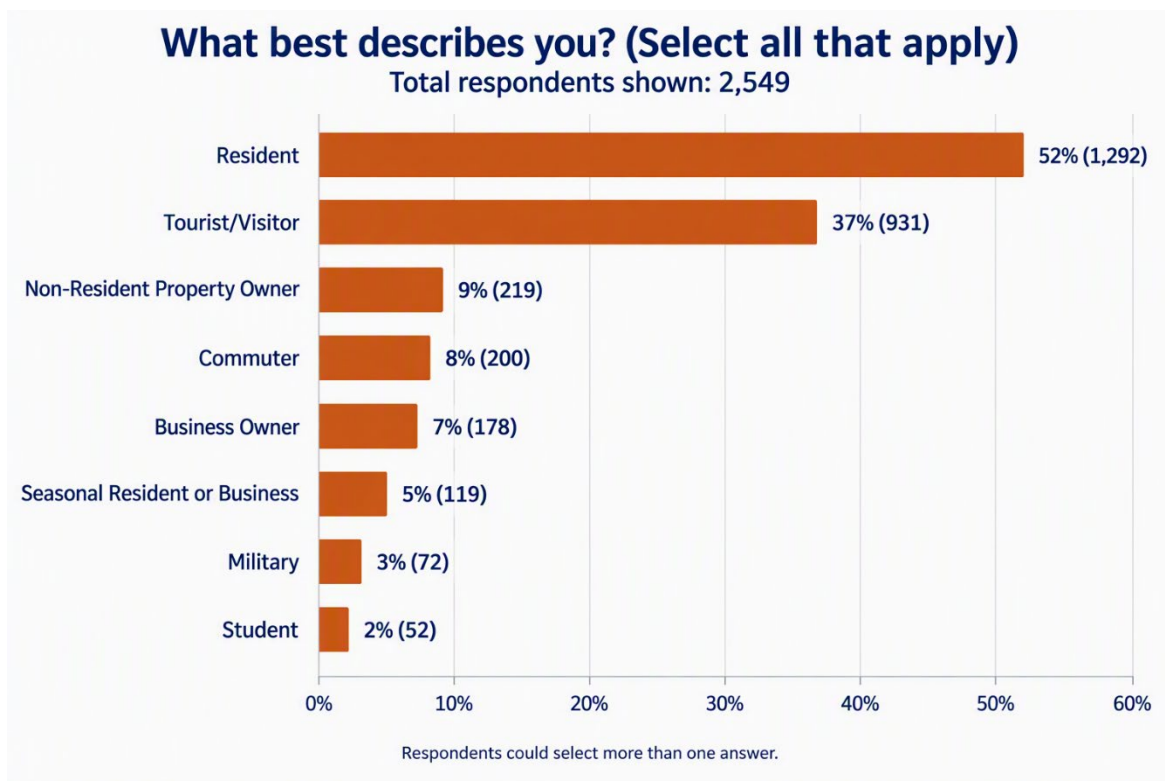


Figure 4. Examples of survey questions and the corresponding distribution of respondent answers.

General Themes

Comments reflected significant concern about the effect of tolling on residents and communities that depend on ferry travel for work, school, medical care, shopping, religious practice, business activities and access to their homes. The recurring themes included:

1. Affordability and opposition to tolling residents.
2. Preservation of priority boarding for Ocracoke Island residents.
3. Effects on students, families, school employees and access to medical care, particularly on Knotts Island.
4. Ferry service reliability and expectations associated with paying a toll.
5. Pass eligibility, pricing and administration.
6. Payment options and access for customers without reliable internet service.
7. Effects on seniors, veterans, people with disabilities and fixed- or low-income households.
8. Business, workforce, delivery, worship, and tourism impacts.
9. Terminal congestion and potential delays associated with toll collection.
10. Questions about toll revenue, implementation costs and alternative funding.
11. Requests to delay implementation, pilot the system or consider bridge alternatives.

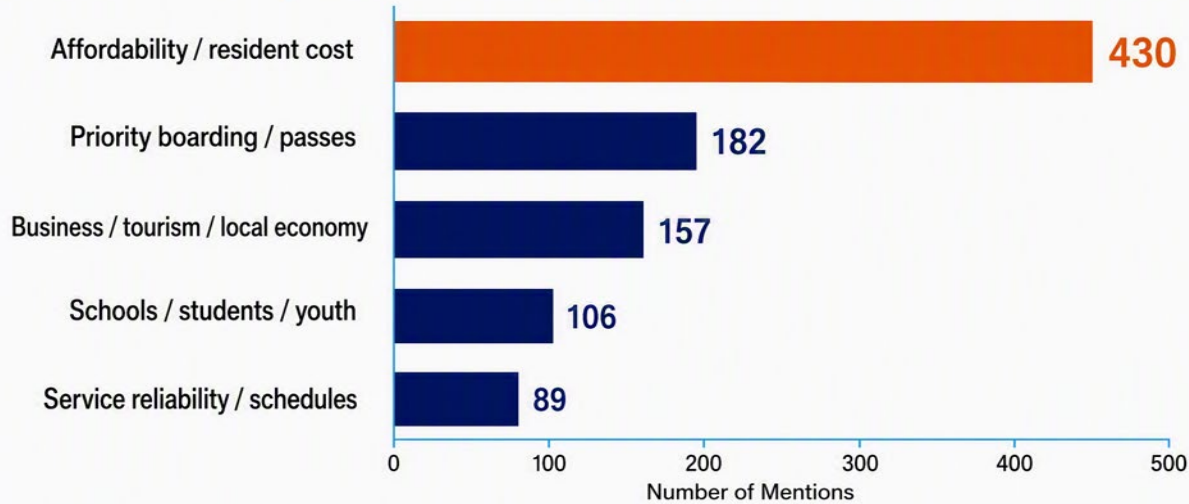
The AI-assisted review of the survey results identified the largest themes as opposition to tolling residents, preservation of priority boarding for Ocracoke Island residents, school transportation impacts, ferry reliability, payment and technology preferences, discounts for potentially vulnerable customers, and alternative infrastructure proposals.

Community concerns and impacts vary by location, indicating that careful thought may be needed regarding location-specific rates.

Figure 5 illustrates the most frequent themes in written comments by number of keyword-coded mentions.

Most Frequent Themes in Written Comments

Keyword-coded mentions; categories are non-exclusive



Counts reflect coded written-comment mentions, not unique respondents or a representative public-opinion poll.

Figure 5. Most frequent themes in written comments. Categories are non-exclusive and reflect coded mentions, not unique respondents.

Ranked Comment Topics

The nine ranked topics below consolidate the 11 recurring themes identified above and are presented from most to least frequently mentioned in the coded comments. Categories are non-exclusive, so a single comment may be reflected in more than one topic.

Rank 1 — Affordability, Resident Impacts and Requests for Exemptions

What We Heard

Commenters frequently described ferries as essential connections rather than optional services and raised concerns about the cumulative financial effect on households that use ferry service frequently.

Participants requested free or reduced travel for groups including:

- Residents of ferry-served communities.
- Frequent commuters.
- Students and school employees.
- Seniors.
- Veterans and active-duty military personnel.
- People with disabilities.
- Fixed- or low-income households.
- Non-resident property owners.
- Businesses, vendors and service providers.

- Chaplains

The survey similarly showed that higher costs for residents, commuters and businesses were the most commonly selected potential community impact. Maintaining affordable travel for frequent users was the most commonly selected action NCDOT could take to make implementation work better.

Rank 2 — Ocracoke Island Resident Priority Boarding

What We Heard

A large and concentrated group of commenters requested that resident priority boarding be maintained for permanent Ocracoke Island residents using the Hatteras – Ocracoke ferry route. Commenters explained that the ferry is the only vehicle connection on and off the island and that predictable access is important for medical and dental appointments, employment, court appearances, shopping, school activities, veterinary care and returning home during periods of heavy visitor traffic.

Many comments distinguished between the toll itself and priority boarding. Some commenters indicated they could accept a toll or annual fee if resident priority boarding were retained. Others requested priority eligibility for non-resident property owners, employees, vendors and delivery vehicles. These concerns appeared repeatedly in online text comments and voicemail submissions.

The public comments strongly demonstrate that resident priority boarding is a central implementation concern for Ocracoke residents.

Rank 3 — Students, Schools and Knotts Island Access

What We Heard

Knotts Island commenters emphasized that the ferry provides access to middle and high schools, pharmacies, hospitals and other essential services located on the Currituck County mainland. Without the ferry, residents may face a drive of approximately 70 miles to reach the nearest pharmacy, and hospital services are not available on the island. Comments requested exemptions or waivers for:

- Students driving personal vehicles for school and school activities.
- Parents transporting students for school and school activities.
- Families attending extracurricular school activities.
- Teachers and other school employees.
- Youth participating in sports and school events.

Commenters also expressed concern that students might instead drive longer routes, including roads outside North Carolina, and that toll costs could limit participation in educational or extracurricular activities.

The AI-assisted review identified student and school transportation impacts as one of the largest comment themes, particularly for the Currituck-Knotts Island route.

Rank 4 — Ferry Reliability and Service Expectations

What We Heard

Commenters on multiple routes questioned whether customers should be charged for service they described as unreliable or frequently operating on amended schedules. Concerns referenced mechanical issues, staffing limitations, schedule changes, missed connections and uncertainty about whether customers could reach appointments or work on time.

Some commenters requested:

- Credits or refunds when scheduled service is canceled.
- More dependable schedules.
- Additional vessels or crews.
- Better notification when service changes.
- Improved coordination between toll collection and boarding.
- Clear information about how toll revenue relates to vessel replacement rather than current operations.

In the online survey, 32 percent indicated that reliability and punctuality did not meet expectations, while 22 percent said frequency did not meet expectations.

Rank 5 — Pass Design, Eligibility and Administration

What We Heard

Commenters asked that annual passes be:

- Assigned to a person or household rather than one vehicle.
- Transferable among multiple household vehicles.
- Easy to purchase and renew.
- Available without an online-only process.
- Supported by clear residency verification requirements.
- Available to businesses, vendors, property owners and frequent workers.
- Accompanied by accessible customer assistance.

Pass eligibility requirements were the most frequently selected pass-related concern within the survey, followed by residency verification and enrollment. Assistance for seniors or people with disabilities, customer-service availability and assistance for customers without internet access were also frequently selected.

Rank 6 — Payment Options, Technology and Terminal Delays

What We Heard

Commenters frequently requested compatibility with NC Quick Pass or E-ZPass. Other suggestions included online payment, mobile applications, credit-card payment, cash, automatic billing, license-plate billing and separate processing for customers who pay in advance.

Online payment was ranked as the most convenient payment method, followed by a mobile application. In-person credit-card payment, cash and automatic billing also received substantial participation.

Commenters also warned that cellular and internet service may be unreliable at some terminals and that some customers do not use smartphones, credit cards or online accounts. Increased terminal congestion caused by payment processing was the second-most frequently selected potential community impact.

Rank 7 — Business, Workforce and Tourism Effects

What We Heard

Businesses and workers expressed concern about additional commuting and delivery costs, workforce recruitment, employee access, vendor priority and the potential transfer of toll expenses to customers. Tourism-related comments included concern that higher travel costs or less reliable service could discourage visitors and day trips, particularly to Ocracoke and other ferry-dependent communities.

The online survey recorded 1,263 selections for reduced numbers of visitors or tourists as a possible community effect and 1,828 selections for higher costs to residents, commuters or businesses.

Rank 8 — Toll Revenue, Implementation Costs and Alternative Funding

What We Heard

Commenters requested greater transparency about:

- The expected revenue generated by each route.
- The cost to install and operate the tolling system.
- The length of time required for toll revenue to support vessel replacement.
- Whether collection expenses could exceed revenue on lower-volume routes.
- Whether other statewide funding sources could be used instead.
- How toll revenue would be tracked and reported.

Suggestions included increased gas taxes, vehicle-registration fees, general transportation funding and alternative infrastructure such as bridges.

Rank 9 — Implementation Schedule, Pilot Testing and Communications

What We Heard

Commenters expressed concern that the January 1, 2027 deadline provides limited time to develop technology, policies, staffing, infrastructure and customer-support processes. Some requested delaying implementation, piloting the system before full launch or holding additional public discussions after implementation begins.

Participants also requested clear information well before implementation, route-specific instructions and prompt communication when ferry schedules or implementation details change. Providing clear information before implementation was the second-most frequently selected implementation action, and 443 respondents selected piloting the system before full implementation.

4. Conclusions and Next Steps

Public input confirmed that ferry service plays different roles across North Carolina's coastal communities. For some participants, the ferry is an occasional or visitor experience. For others, it is a daily connection to employment, education, medical care, businesses, government services and home.

The engagement also showed that toll rates are only one part of the public's concern. Participants consistently emphasized affordable and reliable travel, access for residents and students, priority boarding, simple pass administration, multiple payment options, clear communications and terminal procedures that avoid additional delays.

NCDOT will use these findings to inform toll-rate recommendations, policies, operational planning, customer-support procedures and public information. Some suggestions may be addressed administratively, while others may require action by the N.C. Board of Transportation or the General Assembly. As decisions are made, NCDOT will publish updated information explaining what was decided, the basis for the decision and how public input was considered.

Appendix A. PublicInput.com Final Report Summary

Appendix A. PublicInput.com Final Report Summary is included as a separate attachment.