

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 23, 2022

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Ave. SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

Congratulations on the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the most consequential investment in our nation's infrastructure in a generation. As an island resident and regular ferry rider, I was especially pleased to see the new investments this law makes in ferries, including the new Ferry Service for Rural Communities Program. As the Department of Transportation (DOT) considers how to implement this new program, I encourage you to look at each state's ferry system as a whole rather than base program eligibility on a specific route. In addition, as waiver criteria are developed for this program, I urge you to consider a waiver for small, rural communities that are reliant on a state-run ferry system for reliable year-round and medical transport.

Ferry service serves as vital infrastructure to many rural communities in America, and this is particularly true in Maine, with our fifteen year-round communities living on unbridged islands several miles offshore. For these towns, the ferry is the only remotely affordable link to mainland America (the other options being private boat or chartered flight). The Maine Department of Transportation (Maine DOT)'s Maine State Ferry Service (MSFS) operates regular ferry service connecting six year-round, unbridged island communities to the mainland across several miles of open water: Islesboro, Vinalhaven, North Haven, Matinicus, Swan's Island, and Frenchboro. These are all small, rural communities with year-round populations between 30 and 1300 people. Over the last several months, ferry ridership has rebounded to 2019 pre-Covid service levels where the MSFS provided 16,454 trips, traveling 136,228 nautical miles and transporting 450,000 passengers and 190,000 vehicles.

Every resident of these MSFS-served communities depends on the ferry for emergency medical transportation as well as daily transportation to and from jobs, schools, medical appointments, transit links to the rest of America and the world, delivery of mail, packages, prescription drugs, and transportation of commercial freight such as groceries, lumber, and freshly caught seafood bound for mainland markets. Notably, the ferries also transport thousands of visitors and part-time residents annually, whose on-island spending is essential to these communities' economic survival.

The MSFS provides regular scheduled service across its provided routes and does not budget, track costs, or set passenger rates by specific island route, but rather from a whole system perspective. This allows MSFS to set ticket prices for its various routes with an eye toward affordability for all system users. If ticket prices were set to match the actual cost to provide a specific route, the prices to some islands would be considered unaffordable to many residents. While each individual route is under 50 miles, the MSFS routes combined surpass that distance and the ferries operate from multiple mainland ports that are more than 50 sailing miles apart, complicating operations when ferries or crews need to be shuffled between routes. Given the “whole system” nature of the MSFS, the costs and mileage of one of its mainland-island routes cannot be separated from the cost of running the entire system.

As you consider how to implement the Ferry Service for Rural Communities Program, I encourage you to look at each state ferry system as a whole and not base program eligibility requirements on a specific route, since not all ferry services track costs in this way and are therefore unable to separate their costs by route. Section 71103(a)(2)(B) of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act defines an eligible service as being a ferry service that “serves not less than 2 rural areas located more than 50 sailing miles apart.” This definition clearly allows for supporting a ferry service as a whole and not just a particular route. For the determination of threshold eligibility for this program, a ferry service that provides both basic essential service and emergency medical transportation to rural communities, and operates vessels across a service area that has rural areas that are more than 50 sailing miles apart should be eligible, even if individual service routes are shorter.

Should the MSFS not be eligible to receive funding under Section 71103(a)(2)(B), I urge you to establish waiver criteria for the Program to make eligible any ferry service serving unbridged island communities of fewer than 1500 residents, and/or any ferry service that plays a significant role in a rural community’s emergency medical transportation. For those communities where the ferry is the only way an ambulance can reach medical care ashore, the ferry is truly a lifeline.

The MSFS has not been eligible for traditional federal urban transit funding due to the rural nature of the MSFS-served islands and its mainland terminals. The new Ferry Service for Rural Communities Program could open the door to helpful federal assistance for these rural communities. By taking the steps outlined above, the DOT can ensure that rural island communities like mine in Maine can continue to benefit from the critical lifeline that is its ferry service. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further with you. Thank you for your attention to this request, and I look forward to working with you on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress