

A NEW FERRY UPDATE

By Bobbi Welke-Chair of the Beaver Island Transportation Authority



The Beaver Island Transportation Authority (BITA), a public organization, owns the M/V Emerald Isle. This vessel was designed and built using federal, state, and local funds, and she was launched in 1997. The Emerald Isle is operated by the Beaver Island Boat Company (BIBCO), a privately owned firm, under a management agreement with BITA.

BITA is a St. James Township organization founded in 1993 to establish a transit system in the greater Beaver Island area. When this organization was founded, Peaine Township officials declined the opportunity to join BITA.

In 2012, a new steel-hulled ferry was designed in response to the projected growth of the Island and the aging 1962 Beaver Islander. Federal and State funding was awarded to BITA in 2022, 2023, and 2024 to build a new ferry.

As BITA and BIBCO considered new features to update this older design, state mobility experts proposed that our public/private partnership consider a new ferry with an alternative hull style made from lightweight materials and powered by hybrid engines. On January 14, 2025, the BITA Board approved a six-month planning effort to study and test this next-generation vessel option with multiple interchangeable operating elements. This vessel could run rigged for freight on one trip and solely for passengers on the next or split the same trip with a combination of passengers and freight.

There is a possibility that this next-generation vessel, if approved, would be designed and built by a firm based in Michigan. A prototype version (40' long, whereas our ferry will likely be longer) will be evaluated by the BITA/BIBCO new vessel committee members in March. If the planning phase yields favorable results, this same prototype will travel between Holland, Michigan and Beaver Island in mid-June for reviews by officials both during the run and at our dock. The boat will be on display and open for public tours for all islanders!

If the planning phase is successful, mid-July will mark the beginning of a design and construction phase for delivery of our Island's new ferry in the summer of 2027. If not, we will revert back to the former traditional ferry type, update the design and complete the construction. An update on this decision will be shared this summer.

This initiative is only part of the BITA/BIBCO plan. We will be meeting with MDOT and other state officials to set the stage for more progressive, ongoing funding and address business issues such as onerous procurement rules. Other Michigan island ferry systems will be invited to join these discussions. By working together, we can improve ferry systems across Michigan.

Our strategic approach to a new modern ferry aligns with the 2024 State of the Great Lakes Report (<https://www.michigan.gov/egle/about/organization/office-of-the-great-lakes/state-of-the-great-lakes-report>). In the report, the article "Advancing Michigan's Blue-Green Economy and Environment" sets the stage for a new Michigan Maritime Strategy. Although the article does not specifically cover ferries, we are hopeful that our involvement in further developing this strategy will result in a future report highlighting our new ferry as part of Michigan's Blue-Green Economy and Environment.

