



MEMORANDUM

TO: TPB Technical Committee
FROM: Tom Harrington, TPB Multimodal Planning Program Director
SUBJECT: Passenger Ferry System – Summary of past and current studies
DATE: September 25, 2026

This memorandum provides a summary of the previous studies examining a passenger ferry system in the National Capital Region.

SUMMARY

The idea of a passenger ferry is not new – it has been discussed in the past – starting a bit over 25 years ago with some work done as recently as 2023. The vision for a passenger ferry system has evolved over this period, from a large regional system to a phased system in which one phase would focus on short distance service within the region's core (in/around the District) and another with long distance service connecting some of the outer suburbs to the region's core. There has been, within the past year, a renewed interest in exploring a passenger ferry system with the impetus being a technological breakthrough in watercraft vehicles. This breakthrough is believed to be capable of addressing one of the challenges the region has faced in further developing a passenger ferry system in the region.

All previous studies have been undertaken in Northern Virginia – starting with a VDOT study in 2000 and four more studies between 2009 and 2023 by the Northern Virginia Regional Council (NVRC). The gist of the findings from the NVRC studies, particularly the 2023 study was that there indeed is a market for such a service and there is interest in the private sector to participate. The 2023 NVRC study did examine the service in two phases – short haul and long haul. The short haul phase represented a river circulator system with all stops within the District of Columbia. The long-haul phase included service connecting Joint Bowling Airforce Bases to Prince William and Charles County. Several factors, however, have limited further project planning activities on any phase, including the pandemic as well as considerations of travel times, land side infrastructure considerations, costs and funding, secure access and siting of some of the ferry stops. A significant issue was the watercraft vehicle technology that posed issues that affected travel times.

Within the past year, however, the [Mobility Innovation District](#), a newly created entity in the District of Columbia, has begun to re-examine a passenger ferry system with this new watercraft vehicle technology. The latest technology in watercraft vehicles is the Hydrofoil where the watercraft levitates above the water surface and appears to address some of the speed related constraints of the conventional watercraft vehicles. The Mobility Improvement District has done a preliminary market demand study and is currently doing a follow-up study that will be presented at a September 29th event “Unlocking the District’s Waterways” that will include a demonstration of the new hydrofoil ferry technology.

This information will be presented to the Transportation Planning Board at its October 21, 2026, meeting.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

1. [2001 VDOT Ferry Boat Feasibility Study](#)
2. [2009 Prince William County Route Proving Exercise Presentation](#)
3. [2015 NVRC Final Market Analysis Report for Commuter Ferry Service on the Occoquan, Potomac, and Anacostia Rivers](#)
4. [2023 Commuter Ferry Business Business Plan Phase 1 and 2 Final Report](#)