

**Statement of Kyle Godar
County Engineer
Calhoun County Engineer**

**Before the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee
Subcommittee on Highways & Transit hearing on
“Examining the Role of Ferries in Improving Mobility”**

September 28, 2021

Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, Chair Norton, and Ranking Member Davis:

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before the subcommittee. I am honored to represent my community, the surrounding region and similar communities across the Country as the Committee Examines the Vital Role Ferries play in not only Improving Mobility but also providing access to essential services for many communities similar to my own.

My name is Kyle Godar and I am the County Engineer for Calhoun County, Illinois. As the County Engineer I manage the County Highway Department as well as the County Unit Road District and oversee approximately 300 miles of roadway. Calhoun County’s unique geographical location between the Mississippi River and the Illinois River at the confluence of the great rivers leaves the county nearly surrounded by water. Calhoun County lies along the Mississippi River between Alton, Illinois (part of the St. Louis Metropolitan area) and Louisiana, Missouri. With this over 80-mile section of the Mississippi River without a bridge crossing to the West and the Illinois River to the East, Calhoun County and the surrounding area is reliant on four ferry operations to provide mobility through the region.

Although Calhoun County is in very close proximity to the St. Louis Metropolitan area it remains a very rural community isolated from the urban sprawl and expansion of the Metropolitan area by the Great Rivers. Over 120 years ago Calhoun County earned the nick name the “Apple Kingdom” as much of the County was covered with orchards that supplied locally raised produce to the St. Louis area. Over 100 years later the County still embraces that name as the ferries carry many visitors from the St. Louis area across the Great Rivers to visit the many orchards and farms that provide locally grown produce to the area. The barrier between the urban and rural communities that the Great Rivers create has coincidentally provided a natural barrier which has preserved the entire areas natural resources and historical sites. The unique geographic characteristics of the area have provided the perfect setting for the 20 wildlife management areas, 18 public access areas, and over 40,000 acres of protected and enhanced wildlife habitat actively managed as part of Pere Marquette State Park, Two Rivers National Wildlife Refuge, and the Mississippi River State Fish and Wildlife Area. This all, in addition to the area encompassed by the Rivers themselves, as well as the privately owned farms, orchards, and wineries in the area. The four ferries that operate at Grafton, Golden Eagle, Brussels, and Kampsville provide the connection that allows those from the Metropolitan area to visit, enjoy, and learn about these natural resources. Due to its proximity to the Metropolitan area the Two Rivers National Wildlife Refuge earns its designation as an Urban Wildlife Refuge and as such is

frequented by school bus loads of children, at times multiple school groups a day get the chance to cross the river on the ferries and come learn about the wildlife and natural resources preserved in this area. Many of the ferries across the country provide this same type of connection to national parks, historical preservation areas, and the great outdoors.

The four ferries that operate in Calhoun County and the surrounding area not only serve to support tourism and transport visitors to the area, but the majority of the passengers carried by the ferries are commuters who utilize the ferry system to drastically reduce the number of miles traveled by automobile, as those living in the rural areas make their daily commute to the Metropolitan area. The ferries also reduce the miles traveled by freight carriers. During harvest farmers in the region transport grain across the ferries to port facilities in the Metropolitan area. Without the ferries, marketing grain at these port facilities would not be an option for the area farmers. At the Golden Eagle location alone nearly 600 riders each day are commuters. By utilizing the ferry these commuters are able to change their route from a one-way, 80 mile average trip across some of the most congested routes in the Metro area to a 30 mile average trip across some of the least traveled routes in the area. As such, these ferries greatly reduce congestion and the miles traveled by these commuters. Based on the numbers provided above the Golden Eagle Ferry operation results in an annual reduction of nearly 8,000,000 miles traveled by commuters alone.

Although the topic of this hearing is “Mobility,” the important role that of the Nation’s ferry system plays as it relates to life, health, and safety needs to be understood. Access to health care is an intrinsic need that is only accessible to some by way of ferry. The residents of Calhoun County, Illinois, being a medically underserved area, are reliant on the ferry system to access basic health care. Without the Golden Eagle Ferry in operation, for example, the distance traveled to receive basic health care at times could be increased by 50 miles. When these ferries are not in operation during emergent situations, essential services such as ambulatory evacuation are only available by helicopter air transport. The absence of reliable ferry service could deny many residents basic life needs and access to food. This happens during times of major flooding such as during the spring and summer of 2019. During that time many residents simply had to relocate and move to temporary housing outside of the area.

The Ferry Boat Program (FBP) authorized under Title 23, United States Code (U.S.C.), Sections 129(c) and 147 has provided a funding source that provides assistance to many of these ferry boat operations. All four of the Ferries servicing Calhoun County have had funding made available for allocation through the Ferry Boat Program. Unfortunately, guidance provided by FHWA and some of the eligibility requirements associated with the FBP funds has rendered Calhoun County unable to use the funds as needed. The ownership characteristics of these ferry operations vary widely as most of the ferry operation in our area began as privately owned operations in the 1800s or earlier. As the importance of these ferry operations has become ever more apparent, they have slowly, in different ways, become publicly controlled. Given this relationship between public owners and private operators there are needs that the ferry operations rely on that are determined ineligible. At the Golden Eagle Ferry location for instance, it has been determined that acquisition and improvement to the access road that connects the Ferry terminal to the nearest federal-aid-route is not eligible for funding. This roadway has been maintained by the ferry operator to service the ferry terminal and is public by prescriptive rights

only, as no federal fund or other locally collected tax funds have been used in the past to improve the road. The maintenance on this road has been performed by our Highway Department and paid for out of the tolls collected by the ferry operator with Calhoun County controlling the toll rates. At this time improvements to the road could potentially keep this ferry in operation for an additional 60 days per year on average as protections for minor flooding could be provided.

The ineligibility of “Approach Roadways” for FBP funds is understandable as other funds could be used on the public roadways once they have been acquired and built by the local highway authorities. However, in this situation the FBP funds are needed to acquire the necessary right of way to construct the “Approach Roadway” that could then be added to the Federal-Aid-System of highways for which it is currently not a part of. Once acquired, constructed, and made part of the federal aid system, then it would be understood that it would qualify for other funds and the FBP funds would no longer be eligible. It is my belief that the first acquisition and construction of public access roadways to these ferry terminals should qualify to get these sections of “Approach Roadway” initially added to the Federal-Aid-System of highways.

Additionally, other local ferry operations have had maintenance to major components of their publicly owned vessels determined ineligible. Maintenance on many of these vessels required to meet United States Coast Guard (USCG) requirements can be very costly and involve nearly reconstructing portions of the barges and push boats. This along with the very high cost associated with dry docking facilities has made it apparent that some operations need these funds for maintenance of their vessels.

Given the wide range of ferry service characteristics and ownership structures that exist, a one size fits all approach to ferry boat funding guidance has resulted in many ferry services allowing allotted funds to expire, ours included. Eliminating some of these eligibility issues, especially when associated with one-time discretionary funds that could help to secure public ownership of associated facilities, and secure public control of these facilities would greatly improve the reliability of ferry services and the Federal-Aid-System of Highways.