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Ferries look to lure COVID-cautious commuters back with a breezy ride

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With the Manhattan skyline behind them, passengers ride a NY Waterway ferry up the Hudson River to Weehawken in April 2021. As more people return to their workplaces, ferries traveling to and from New York City have seen an increase in passengers. With the warmer weather, an advantage is ferries have an open-air top deck for those concerned about COVID-19. Aristide Economopoulos | NJ Advance Media

By Larry Higgs | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Despite the best efforts of transit agencies to sanitize buses and trains, a skeptical riding public has been slow to return to riding them.

Enter the ferry and it's not-so-secret weapon — a breezy open-air upper deck, perfect for the biggest germaphobe.

As more people start to gradually return to workplaces, officials at New York Waterway and Seastreak report that ridership is incrementally, but steadily increasing.

“Since the beginning of March, things are trending back up. Our ridership last week was the highest since last October,” said Armand Pohan, chairman, president and chief executive officer of the privately operated NY Waterway ferry service. “I have no reason not to think it will continue to climb.”

That high is 15% of pre-[COVID-19](#) normal ridership, he said. Pre-pandemic daily ridership was 30,000-plus passengers, said Wiley Norvell, a New York Waterway spokesman.

Seastreak, which runs high speed ferries between Monmouth County and New York, is experiencing the same phenomenon as employees start returning to work places.

“We now believe many employees are going to start working in their NYC offices part-time beginning in June and July,” said James D. Barker, Seastreak Business Development and Partnerships director. “Since February, our ridership has been steadily increasing again. We are now back to carrying about 20% of the passengers we carried in 2019.”

Seastreak averaged an average of 4,000 daily weekday passengers in 2019.

Similar to NJ Transit rail and private bus carriers, both ferry companies saw ridership rocked by the pandemic. The worst for NY Waterway was a low of 1,000 daily riders after service was slowly relaunched in July 2020. Service has been judiciously restored as ridership demands.

Weekday ridership reached 4,000 daily during the week of April 4 and hit 4,194 on April 8.

“We’re seeing slow and steady growth every week,” Norvell said.

Seastreak saw ridership take a similar roller coaster ride.

“When this all started in spring 2020, our daily ridership quickly dropped to about 50 outbound passengers (a) day,” Barker said.

Unlike last winter’s ridership reversals, after a second coronavirus surge, that is unlikely to happen as more people are vaccinated, Barker and Pohan said.

Both ferry executives are optimistic that a ride on an open upper deck of a ferry on a pleasant spring day might seal the deal for attracting commuters.

“The open deck is an advantage,” Pohan said. “We have pushed that. Look at our commercials, we’re stressing the openness of the ferry. We are seeing some new people.”

“Our vessels are also built with expansive outdoor areas and so we expect to see a positive bump in ridership as the weather gets warmer,” Barker said. “Even now, we are seeing increased commuter ridership on sunny days because riders are utilizing our outdoor spaces. We expect these trends to continue in the summer months.”

Even on an unpleasant weather days, ferries have enough room in the closed passenger cabin for social distancing, since ridership is far short of capacity, Pohan said

Still ferry ridership can be weather sensitive. Sunny, pleasant days bring out more passengers. "The (ridership) swing between a rainy day and a clear day is much greater than usual," Pohan said. "If people are going in, they'll pick the ones that are nice days."

Meanwhile service is altered to meet ridership demands.

"We can easily adapt to shifting demand. We have been able to utilize some of our smaller high-speed vessels for departures with lower ridership and then substitute our larger, 500-passenger vessels as ridership grew," Barker said. "We will continue to use this strategy as we analyze our ridership on a weekly basis and adapt our schedule as needed."

NY Waterway weekend ridership to New York is increasing and the ferry company is looking for ways to build on it.

"We see them on weekends, the levels have gotten better," Pohan said. "Last Saturday (April 10), 2,000 people took the MidTown ferry to the city."

Weekend ferry ridership is tied to the reopening of New York City attractions. The biggest passenger generator will be the return of Broadway shows, he said.

Recent service changes added hours of service, running an hour earlier on weekend mornings and an hour later on weekend evenings, between the West 39th Street ferry terminal in Manhattan and Weehawken and Hoboken.

New weekend shuttle bus service was started to connect riders from the Midtown ferry terminal to Chelsea and Greenwich Village, along a new route that loops south and back to the terminal.

More weekend service is starting May 1, when downtown weekend rides will be offered from Hoboken, stopping in Paulis Hook in Jersey City and going to Brookfield Place in lower Manhattan, Pohan said.

"Little by little we'll add additional service," he said. A few weeks after that we'll run buses from Edgewater to Weehawken."

Both companies are looking to pick up riders on recreational ferry trips this year.

"One silver lining to lower commuter demand has been that our vessels are now available for more leisure trips," Barker said. "Late last summer we started offering whale watching from Highlands and had a 96% success rate spotting humpback whales just off of Sandy Hook National Park."

NY Waterway also plans to return to running recreational ferry trips for the first time in eight to 10 years, starting with Fourth of July fireworks trips and some fall foliage trips up the Hudson River.



A couple looks over the New York City skyline while on a NY Waterway ferry on April 13, 2021. The ferry company is considering adding recreational trips, such as fall foliage trips up the Hudson and Fourth of July fireworks viewing trips. Aristide Economopoulos | NJ Advance Media

“There definitely will be a great deal of discretionary travel and staycations... People want to get out and do something, but might not be willing to travel,” Pohan said. “We see the demand increased by the pandemic.”

Seastreak plans to offer whale watching and sunset cruises this summer departing from Highlands and directly from Manhattan.

“There is glacial movement,” Pohan said of the rising ferry ridership. “We have to be ready to respond to it and take advantage.”

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