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**HEADLINE:** MOST **FERRIES** SHORT OF LIFE RAFTS -- IS IT A TITANIC PROBLEM OR A REASONABLE COST-CONTROL MEASURE?

**BYLINE:** **ERIC NALDER;** SEATTLE TIMES STAFF REPORTER

**BODY:**

There are far too few life rafts for the passengers, but the people in charge insist there's no need to worry: The vessel is virtually unsinkable.

The Titanic?

A Washington State **Ferry**.

The new film about the 1912 maritime disaster has some passengers wondering about safety measures aboard the state's fleet.

Others haven't thought to worry - until they learn the facts. As Toni Booker talked to a reporter aboard a **ferry** bound for Bainbridge Island from Seattle last week, images from the film flowed freely - and frighteningly:

Frantic passengers fighting over **lifeboats**. Bodies bobbing in frigid waters.

On average, the reporter explained, a fully loaded state **ferry** carries only enough inflatable life rafts to evacuate one passenger in seven. And although Puget Sound has no icebergs, its waters are cold enough to kill within half an hour.

"You're serious?" asked Booker. "I'm really disturbed. I made the assumption that if this **ferry** went down, I'd be able to get on a raft and ride away."

It's an assumption held by many of the commuters, tourists and travelers who make 24 million trips a year on Washington State **Ferries**.

And it's wrong.

For years, the National Transportation Safety Board has pressured the state **ferry** system to add more life rafts. And for years, state officials have successfully resisted.

Buying enough rafts for all passengers just wouldn't be cost-effective, they argue. Besides, they add - again conjuring scenes from the blockbuster movie - the boats are virtually unsinkable.

But even at the **ferry** system's headquarters near Seattle's Colman Dock, some share Toni Booker's concern.

Capt. Mike Schilling, a 23-year system veteran, was assigned recently to study safety regulations. He was answering some technical questions for a Times reporter last week when he halted in mid-sentence and glanced over at

the public-relations person who accompanied him.

"I can't lie to the reporter," Schilling said. "If I had my druthers, I'd love to see life rafts for everybody. If we had a fire on board, with a simultaneous grounding, it would be much safer."

The **ferry** system's former safety officer, who retired last November, agrees.

The system's bosses "go by the old tradition that it has never happened before and it is not going to happen," said Tom Gowdy, who served six years as safety chief for the system and 20 years in a similar capacity at shipyards. "But someday it is probably going to happen. I think they should have enough boats for everybody on board."

In 1996, the U.S. Coast Guard proposed requiring passenger vessels operating in inland waters - including the Washington State **Ferries** - to carry enough life rafts for everybody aboard. It was an attempt to match tougher international standards and was part of broader regulatory change.

But under pressure from the **ferry** system and a lobbying group, the Coast Guard backed down and agreed to study the issue further.

The NTSB was upset, issuing a report afterward that said: "This recommendation was on the safety board's most-wanted list.' "

As it stands, federal regulations are so paltry that even the **ferry** system exceeds them. Life rafts for 36 people are all the Coast Guard requires on a **ferry** carrying more than 2,000.

**Ferries** to Canada have rafts

The Coast Guard did get one rule changed: requiring full life-raft capacity on boats that ply international waters, in order to meet treaties. The state was forced to fit two **ferries** on the Anacortes-to-Vancouver-Island run with enough rafts for everyone aboard. System officials nearly shut down the run rather than comply, but finally capitulated.

All of British Columbia's **ferries** have full raft capacity. So do Washington state's three passenger-only **ferries**, which fall under a different regulatory category than the 21 car **ferries**.

Some of the car **ferries** have only enough raft capacity to handle one in 12 passengers.

Adding full raft capacity to the **ferries** that lack it would be costly: nearly \$ 9 million for the purchase and installation, and \$ 5 million a year for maintenance and manning.

"When you take a look at the cost, it can't be justified," said Marine Operations Director Joe Nortz.

The **ferries** have excellent radar and firefighting equipment, he explained, and the boats are never more than two miles from shore.

Other vessels, which could rescue passengers, are usually in the area.

The Puget Sound has one of the best vessel-traffic systems in the nation, and

the **ferry** system has a 50-year history free of major tragedies and without a single fatality.

Life jackets, which are cheaper than rafts, are in plentiful supply on the **ferries**. Besides, Nortz and others point out, evacuation is a last resort. The safest thing for people to do in most emergencies is to stay on the boat.

Stan Stumbo, a naval architect for the system, said the boats are nearly unsinkable.

Each **ferry** has watertight compartments below the main deck, better ones on the newer **ferries** than on the old. You could flood as many as three of the compartments, Stumbo said, and the vessel would stay afloat - depending on which three are penetrated.

All of that is reassuring, but not good enough for John Dwyer, the senior member of the Coast Guard safety office in Seattle.

"Although the **ferry** system hasn't had any loss of life, there've been a number of . . . collisions and groundings that represent a real potential threat to the people on board," he said.

**Ferry** officials concede that the likeliest emergency to cause an evacuation would not be a sinking, but a major fire that starts on the car deck.

"We are all afraid someone will roll aboard with a junker that's leaking gas," said Stumbo. "That's something we can't control. We can control the boat, but not what someone rolls aboard the boat."

Stumbo argues that even in a fire, passengers are safest staying aboard the **ferry**. The captain would pilot the ship to shore, perhaps even grounding it, while the sprinkler system and foam fire extinguishers would confine the blaze and the crew would dump burning vehicles overboard.

That's nice in theory, said UW professor emeritus Ed Wenk, but what happens if the **ferry** is dead in the water and the boat's firefighting systems fail because of a power loss? That has occurred on ships all over the world, said Wenk, an expert on maritime safety.

"The potential for catastrophe is great," he said.

Wenk ignited the **ferry**-safety debate in 1982 when he issued a report criticizing the state for having only one wooden **lifeboat** per **ferry**.

The NTSB issued its first recommendation calling for **lifeboats** on **ferries** (and other small, inland passenger vessels) in 1984, repeating the recommendation several times.

When Mike Lowry was in Congress in 1988, he introduced a bill that would have required a full raft capacity.

The bill was defeated, and by the time Lowry became governor he had tired of the battle.

He shudders, though, when he sees packed **ferries** with inadequate rafts.

"To me," he said, "it is not excusable. . . ."

Although **ferry** accidents in Europe and Southeast Asia have killed thousands, Wenk thinks the state might not be required to have full raft capacity until there is a tragedy in this country, one that would do for passenger boats what the Exxon Valdez did for tankers.

Bill and Jill Grady, a Bainbridge Island couple who have been **ferry** riders since 1973, said they didn't need "Titanic" to sway them in favor of life rafts. One night, five or six years ago, they watched as **ferry** workers were unable to extinguish a car fire on the main deck.

"Two guys in an old pickup truck, who had been drinking beer, jumped out and got the fire out with an extinguisher," said Bill Grady, a Seattle attorney. "I think the big threat to these boats is fire."

Why any life rafts at all?

Riders might be baffled by the variance in raft capacity on **ferries**. Some boats carry enough rafts for 25 percent of the passengers on a fully loaded run, while others carry only enough for 7 percent. Boats with similar capacity, the new **ferry** Tacoma and the old **ferry** Yakima, have raft capacities of 400 and 195, respectively.

Seattle attorney John Henry Browne, who was riding the same **ferry** as Booker, asked this provocative question: "If you don't have enough life rafts for everyone, why do you have any at all?"

**Ferry** system spokeswoman Susan Harris replies that the rafts are mostly needed to rescue people who might get in trouble on other boats in the vicinity of a **ferry**.

Though there aren't enough life rafts for everyone, **ferry** system officials say in an emergency some rafts could be overloaded. On the downside, however, some rafts have failed to deploy during tests, which could aggravate the shortage in an emergency.

Not all **ferry** passengers think more rafts are necessary. The Washington **Ferry Riders Coalition**, a small group of regular passengers, are concerned primarily with fare hikes and service. They say rates would likely rise and service suffer if money were spent on rafts.

"If you want safety on the streets of Seattle, you'd want a cop on every block," said member Ben Dysart. "Then the people would start moving out of Seattle because you couldn't afford the taxes."

Because of budget restrictions, life rafts must compete with such other safety needs as crew training to prevent panic during emergencies and better fire-fighting systems on older **ferries**.

So the **ferries** continue without full raft capacity, and the Coast Guard continues to study the issue.

Meanwhile, "Titanic" is giving **ferry** riders plenty to think about.

Harris said that when her son saw the movie, he vowed not to ride on **ferries**. He changed his mind, though, and rode one yesterday.

Bainbridge resident Schuyler Ingle said he had always assumed that "since it has never happened, it's not going to happen" on the **ferries**.

"But when it's blowing out there and you hit waves in a funny way, when there's a big thud and it kind of throws the boat around," he said, "you kind of look around. . . ."

"Where do you go? Where do you run to?" he said. "It'll be a rude shock should it ever happen."

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----- Number of life rafts on Puget  
Sound **ferries** -----

Despite urging from the National Transportation Safety Board, the Washington State **Ferry** System has failed to equip most of its vessels with enough life rafts to accommodate a capacity crowd of passengers. (1)

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: **Ferry** : Raft : :

: capacity	: capacity	: percentage	: -----	: -----	: -----
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- - - - -	- - - - -	- - - - -	. Chelan	: 1,200	: 250 : 20.8
- - - - -	- - - - -	- - - - -	. Hiyu	: 204	: 30 : 14.7
Hyak	: 2,074	: 195	: 9.4	- - - - -	- - - - -
: - - - - -	. Illahee	: 616	: 150	: 24.4	: - - - - -
- - - - -	. Issaquah	: 1,200	: 195	: 16.2	- - - - -
- : - - - - -	. Kaleetan	: 2,283	: 195	: 8.5	- - - - -
: 1,200	: 195	: 16.2	- - - - -	- : - - - - -	- - - - -
- - - - -	. Kittitas	: 1,100	: 195	: 17.7	- - - - -
- - - - -	. Klahowya	: 1,093	: 195	: 17.8	- - - - -
- : - - - - -	. Klickitat	: 617	: 150	: 24.3	- - - - -
Nisqually	: 665	: 60	: 9.0	- - - - -	- : - - - - -
- : - - - - -	. Quinault	: 616	: 150	: 24.4	- - - - -
- : - - - - -	. Rhododendron	: 546	: 120	: 21.0	- - - - -
- - - - -	. Sealth	: 1,216	: 195	: 16.0	- - - - -
Spokane	: 2,013	: 240	: 11.9	- - - - -	- : - - - - -
- - - - -	. Tacoma	: 2,520	: 400	: 15.8	- - - - -
- - : - - - - -	. Tillikum	: 1,140	: 195	: 17.1	- - - - -
- - - - -	. Walla Walla	: 2,000	: 240	: 12.0	- - - - -
- . Yakima	: 2,496	: 195	: 7.8	-----	-----
-----	. Total	: 25,919	: 3,740	: 14.4	-----
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Source: **Ferry** inspection certificates.

(1) The Evergreen State and the Elwha, which travel to Canada, have enough life rafts to accommodate all passengers.

**GRAPHIC:** CHART: PHOTO; 1) THE SEATTLE TIMES: NUMBER OF LIFE RAFTS ON PUGET SOUND **FERRIES** (SEE END OF TEXT) > 2) GREG GILBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES: FEW SEATS REMAIN EMPTY ON THE TACOMA ON A 7:10 A.M. RUN FROM BAINBRIDGE ISLAND. IT CARRIES 3,000 PASSENGERS, WITH LIFE-RAFT SPACE FOR 400.

**LOAD-DATE:** January 12, 1998

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