CBITD

E-Ticketing at Casco Bay Lines

Framing a path forward

Board discussion

Why this conversation, today

We have met with three vendors over the fall and winter. None of them offered an obvious, low-risk solution that meet CBL's unique needs. The one that appeared most promising had its largest public ferry contract terminated in March.

Before we move further, I want to better understand what the board's goals for e-ticketing are, explain why peer agencies have struggled with similar initiatives, and develop a framework for moving this initiative forward.

Today's goals

1 **Get specific about what we mean**

Define what we are actually asking for before we ask anyone to build it.

2 **Understand why this is hard**

Peer ferry systems have spent millions and still do not have working systems.

3 **Agree on a path forward**

A framework we can defend, not a product we have to sell.

"E-ticketing" is not one thing

When board members, staff, or riders say "e-ticketing,"
they often mean very different things.

E-ticketing is a family of related capabilities, not a single product. Each capability can be built, bought, or deferred independently. Some cost tens of thousands of dollars. Others cost $100's of millions.

Some change nothing about how we board the vessel. Others require us to rebuild our boarding workflow, install new hardware at the terminal, and retrain crew member.

Figuring out which ones we actually want is the most important decision we can make before we start.

The question we have to answer first

"What problem are we actually trying to solve?"

Depending on the answer, we might build one thing, or five, or none of the below.

The e-ticketing spectrum

When someone says "e-ticketing," they could mean any tier below. Each is a different project, with different costs, and different capabilities.

1 Basic digital ticketing

Buy online, carry the ticket on your phone, board with visual validation.

Small ferry operators (Fire Island Ferries), small bus and transit agencies.

APPROXIMATE INVESTMENT

$50K–$500K

typically a SaaS subscription

2 Customer accounts and pass management

Tier 1 plus customer accounts, online pass renewal, purchase history, self-service kiosks.

NY Waterway, NYC Ferry, Steamship Authority (when their new system launches).

APPROXIMATE INVESTMENT

$500K–$5M

depending on platform vs bespoke

3 Account-based with loyalty and fare capping

Tier 2 plus customer profiles, volume-based discounts, "loyalty" rewards, automatic fare capping.

Boston CharlieCard, Chicago Ventra, airlines (Delta SkyMiles, United MileagePlus).

APPROXIMATE INVESTMENT

$10M–$30M*

typically bespoke or heavily customized

4 Open-loop contactless and integrated MaaS

Tier 3 plus tap any card or phone at a reader, multi-modal integration, dynamic pricing.

London TfL (Oyster + contactless), NYC OMNY, major European rail networks.

APPROXIMATE INVESTMENT

$30M–$500M+

always bespoke at this scale

**Capital costs only. Full program value including 10+ years of operations runs significantly higher. CharlieCard (MBTA) is a ~$926M program through 2031; Ventra (Chicago) began at a $454M contract.*

Lower ends of each range assume modern off-the-shelf SaaS platforms. Bespoke builds cost substantially more. Ranges are rough industry estimates.

Where we are today

Paper tickets are not the problem. They are the performance standard any new system has to meet.

300-400

passengers boarded in a typical peak turnaround

~15 min

boarding window at Peaks and Portland

995

active annual passholders, plus 30-day and 90-day passes

20+

daily trips a pass must be validated against in season

What paper does well

Visual validation on the gangway is nearly instantaneous. No device dependency, no connectivity dependency, no battery dependency. Our crews can move a full vessel in a narrow window because the friction per passenger is effectively zero.

Any replacement has to meet this bar. Not approach it. Meet it.

The Sea Dogs comparison is not quite right

Sports venues are a common reference, but our operating reality is different in four ways.

A Sea Dogs game at Hadlock Field

One event

One date, one time, one ticket.

60 minute arrival window

Fans filter in gradually.

Six or more scanners

Parallel gates, staffed specifically for entry.

Single-use ticket

Validated once and done.

A Casco Bay Lines boarding

20+ trips, every day

One pass valid across multiple vessels with a 60-day validity (in season).

15 minute turnaround

A compressed boarding followed by immediate departure.

One or two crew

On a narrow gangway.

Multi-use passes

Must check validity, not just authenticity.

Case study: Washington State Ferries

Largest ferry system in the United States. Project terminated last month after roughly three years.

What happened

WSF hired a specialized ferry ticketing vendor in 2024 to modernize ticketing and vehicle reservations. Contract was terminated in March 2026.

An independent review cited:

- Rushed procurement that prioritized low cost over vendor capability
- A project charter approved only after a vendor was already selected
- Key roles left unfilled or filled too late
- No meaningful user testing with riders or staff
- Unrealistic schedule driven by wishful thinking

By the numbers

~$22M — total project budget reported

~$3M — already spent with little deployable work

3+ years — elapsed, still no working system

Late 2027 — earliest possible first-route launch now

Takeaway: specialized ferry vendors with good references can still produce failed projects. The contract is not the control.

Case study: Steamship Authority

A larger regional peer. Spent millions on a website that is still not live.

What happened

Starting in 2022, SSA spent two years redesigning the public-facing website while leaving the back-end reservation system untouched. That reservation system, built in 1996, is still maintained by a single retired contractor in Wisconsin.

In December 2025, the Massachusetts Inspector General found:

- Between $2M and $4M-plus wasted before the project was shelved
- No functional product delivered after two years of work
- Board "exercised virtually no meaningful oversight"

By the numbers

$2M-$4M+ public funds wasted on the website

Zero functional product delivered in 2+ years

Takeaway: SSA is ten times our size and identified the problem correctly in 2018. They still got it wrong. Scale does not prevent failure. Governance does.

Case study: NY Waterway

A high-throughput ferry operator solved the boarding-speed problem in a way that may translate to our crews.

The visual validation approach

Instead of requiring every passenger to scan a barcode, NY Waterway's app presents an activated ticket with dynamic animation, a live timestamp, changing colors, and the route details. Deckhands validate visually as passengers board, exactly the way paper tickets work today.

A single activated ticket can cover a group, so a family of four validates at the same pace as one passenger. Tickets stored on the device work without cell signal. Used tickets gray out and the system catches duplicates on the back end.

Why this matters for us

- Same human throughput as paper tickets, no scanner per passenger
- No device-to-device connectivity required at the gangway
- Crew workflow is familiar: look, confirm, wave through
- Pass holders keep their pass in their wallet app, renewed annually
- Full back-end data is still captured through the app itself

What breaks these projects, and what saves them

Across the peer ferry systems that have tried this, the patterns are remarkably consistent.

What kills them

Front-end first

Redesigning the customer app while the accounting and operations backend stays untouched.

Big-bang rollout

Going live system-wide on one date, instead of one product at a time.

Vendor-driven requirements

Letting the vendor's product decide what the agency needs, rather than the reverse.

No paper fallback

Removing paper before the new system has earned trust.

What makes them work

Backend first

Fix how the system talks to accounting, reporting, and operations before touching the customer experience.

Phase by product

Launch online pass renewals first. Then mobile tickets. Then broader features. Never all at once.

Requirements drive vendors

Document what we need in writing. Vendors are selected against that document, not the reverse.

Test with real crews and riders

Pilot on one route, in real conditions, before scaling.

None of these are technical insights. They are governance and discipline choices.

CLOSING

This can be done.

It has to be done carefully.

Discussion and questions