



Dawson Yukon River Crossing Engagement

Preliminary result summary



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Background

The George Black Ferry and ice bridge are the primary method for crossing the Yukon River in Dawson City. The ice bridge typically is open from January to April and the George Black Ferry provides service from May through October. As there is no overlap between the ice bridge and ferry operations, there are times when a river crossing is not available twice a year.

In recent years, there have been challenges associated with both the ice bridge and the George Black Ferry. Climate change, increasing costs, licencing and aging infrastructure are making it increasingly difficult to continue with the status quo on the river crossing.

How we engaged – open house

On March 16, 2023, Highways and Public Works organized two in-person public engagement sessions, which were open to residents to provide their feedback in an informal format.

Given the current challenges associated with the ice bridge and George Black Ferry, the engagement focused on better understanding the values and experiences that matter presently to Dawson residents regarding the river crossing.

Overview

Attendees were given sticky notes to offer their opinions, which were displayed on engagement boards and maps.

A projected slideshow continuously ran during the sessions to provide attendees with background information. This included the current methods of the river crossing, seasonal operational schedule of the ferry and ice bridge, an overview of the engagement format, and the next steps of the engagement process. HPW representatives were also available to answer questions from attendees.

About 60 residents attended each session and we received more than 155 comments from participants during the sessions.

Engagement boards

The engagement boards featured the following prompting questions:

- How do you feel about the current methods of crossing the river? What's working for you and what isn't?
- What else is important to you that we should consider when planning for the future of the river crossing?
- How important are these factors when planning for the future of the river crossing?
 - Heritage considerations
 - Environmental factors
 - Financial considerations
 - Tourism considerations

On each of these engagement boards there was a scale from not important to very important. Participants were encouraged to share their thoughts on the various themes by writing them on a sticky note and then placing the note according to their perceived level of importance.

How we engaged – survey

Through the Yukon Bureau of Statistics, a survey went out to Dawson area residents which ran for six weeks (March 19 to June 30). Similar to the open house, the purpose of the survey was to capture resident's experiences with the current Yukon River crossing and what's important to them when thinking about the future.

The following questions were asked in the survey:

- How important to you is it to be able to cross the river in Dawson year-round?
- How satisfied are you with the current options for crossing the river in Dawson?
- How important are these factors when planning for the future of the river crossing:
 - Heritage considerations?
 - Financial considerations?
 - Environmental factors?
 - Tourism considerations?

In the survey, participants could rate their response on a scale of very important, somewhat important, and not at all important. There were also three opportunities for residents to provide open feedback on the topics of:

- How satisfied are you with the current options for crossing the river in Dawson?
- Are there other factors that are important to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson?
- Are there any other comments or concerns you have about the future of the river crossing?

What we heard – open house

Ice bridge and George Black Ferry operations

Prompting question:

How do you feel about the current methods of crossing the river? What's working for you and what isn't?

Ice bridge feedback summary

- We heard many positive comments about how people liked the ice bridge and felt it was well built and maintained by the current contractors.
- Some felt the ice bridge was becoming too unreliable and taking too long to construct due to climate change.
- Others voiced they felt it was posing a safety risk to those trying to cross the river in the years where construction of an official ice bridge is late in the season or does not happen at all.
- There were also questions as to how much the ice bridge costs to maintain and whether the Government of Yukon should let locals set up the ice bridge to save money.

George Black ferry feedback summary

- Respondents were divided on the issue of whether the ferry operation is meeting their needs.

- The majority of the recommendations on the future of the ferry centred on building a structural bridge to provide year-round access.
- Many expressed concerns about the reliability of the aging ferry and the impact it has on residents and tourists when it breaks down.
- Lineups for the ferry during peak tourist season were also a source of frustration, as wait times can exceed two hours.

Environmental considerations

Prompting questions:

How important are environmental factors when planning for the future of the river crossing?

Feedback summary:

- The majority of feedback placed a high value on considering environmental factors when planning for the future of the river crossing.
- Residents expressed concerns about the environmental impact (e.g., wildlife, surrounding land and water quality) of any future river crossing option.
- There were also concerns raised about the environmental impact of the ferry, as some residents shared that the ferry dumps gravel and chemicals into the river and disturbs wildlife.
- Climate change and its impact on the ice bridge was also a concern.
- Overall, there was a common theme of residents wanting an environmentally friendly and energy efficient river crossing option in the future.

Financial considerations

Prompting questions:

How important are financial considerations when planning for the future of the river crossing?

Feedback summary:

- There was a common theme that residents wanted safety and year-round access prioritized over economic impact.



- Some residents wanted to know what the long-term plans are for the river crossing as this could impact their decision to buy property across the river.
- We also heard that the government should consider a river crossing capable of generating revenue to offset some of the long-term costs.

Tourism considerations

Prompting questions:

How important are tourism considerations when planning for the future of the river crossing?

Feedback summary:

- We heard that while tourism is beneficial to the economy it does have a significant impact on the operation of the ferry.
- Some West Dawson and Sunnydale residents expressed their dissatisfaction with how the influx of tourists has increased ferry wait times during peak hours and asked for a separate ferry line for residents.
- Other suggestions included a bigger ferry, cable car and walkable bridge. These were recommended to help reduce ferry wait times and queues during peak demand.

Heritage considerations

Prompting questions:

How important are heritage considerations when planning for the future of the river crossing?

Feedback summary

- The look of Dawson City as a heritage and tourism destination came up as another important consideration for residents. Although some would appreciate a year-round crossing, they did not want a crossing that would change the look of the city.
- Many also advocated that Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation be a part of discussions regarding heritage impacts.

Other considerations

Prompting questions:



What else is important to you that we should consider when planning for the future of the river crossing?

Feedback summary:

- In this category we received many suggestions for potential options for the river crossing. These included a:
 - bridge;
 - energy-efficient ferry;
 - combination of ferry and a pedestrian bridge;
 - cable car; and
 - gondola.
- We also heard that any future development should take into consideration increased traffic and a changing climate.
- Others advocated that any development should be a community-based decision and not driven by the needs of the mining industry.
- Residents commented that freeze up and break up are a part of the unique West Dawson culture.

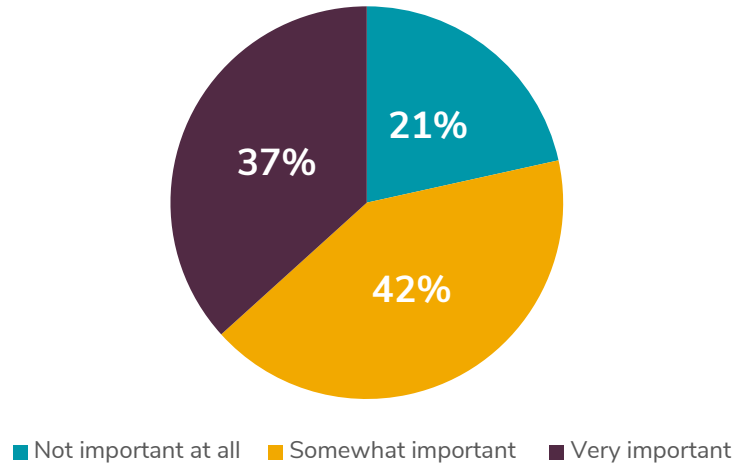
What we heard – survey

Summary

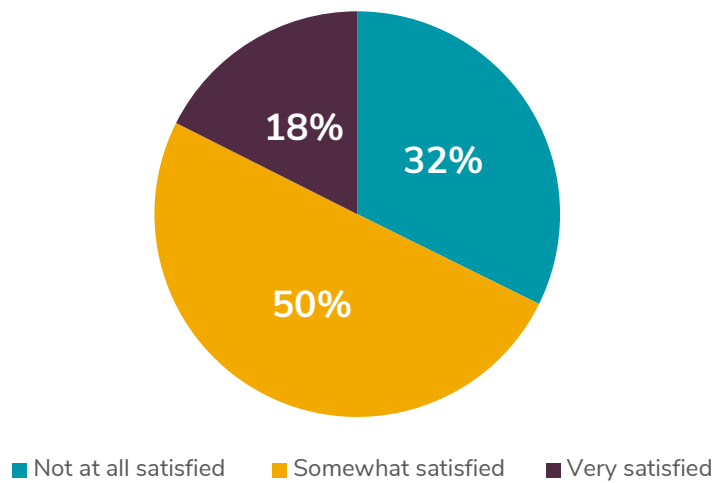
- 462 out of 2108 Dawson residents responded to the survey resulting in a 21.5% response rate.
- An average of 200 comments were provided in each of the open feedback sections within the survey.

Survey results

How important to you is it to be able to cross the river in Dawson year-round?



Question: How satisfied are you with the current options for crossing the river in Dawson?



For this question, there was an opportunity to provide an open comment. The comments have been categorized below:

Comments regarding George Black Ferry	total comments: 207
a. All-season access is important and needed	82
b. Mechanical issues and reliability of an ageing vessel	72
c. Unpredictable wait times to cross and long lines	42



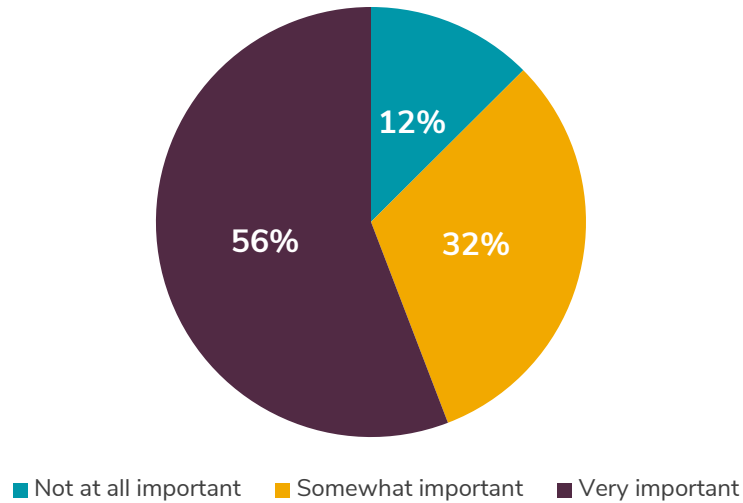
d. Environmental concerns.....	14
e. Costs too much to fuel and maintain	9
f. It's important to Dawson culture.....	7
g. It's important to limit access to West Dawson/Sunnydale	6
h. An all-season crossing is not financially responsible.....	3
Not satisfied with the ice bridge.....	total comments: 52
i. Unpredictable freeze/thaw conditions in a changing climate	40
j. Costs too much to build and maintain.....	5

Quotes from participants:

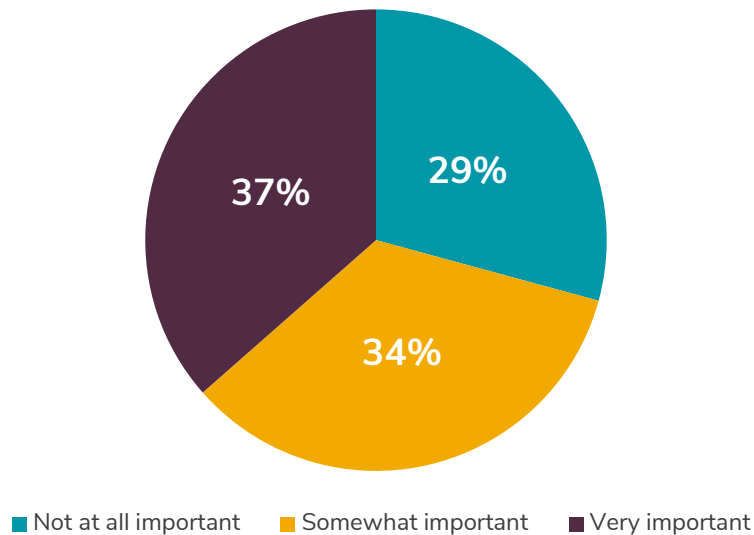
- *“The ferry is an outdated, inefficient means of crossing the river. I feel it time to seriously consider building a bridge to bring the Top of the World Highway to a proper transportation route. Not only for West Dawson/Sunnydale residents (of which there is a significant and growing number) but also for commercial, mining, tourism and general traffic on this northern route.”*
- *“Very happy with ice bridge and ferry, absolutely do not want a bridge”*
- *“Not satisfied with ferry line ups or uncertainty in length/timing of break up & freeze up. Concerned with access to emergency services for West Dawson/Sunnydale residents year round.”*
- *“I like having a ferry, but we need a new one.”*
- *“The question to be asked is whether we value culture or convenience. The lack of bridge attracts certain types of individuals to West Dawson who value a more rustic way of life. This micro culture is at risk with the development of a bridge. Also, now with the advancement of drone technology we are able to more readily deliver medications (already done this year 2023) and food or other supplies.”*



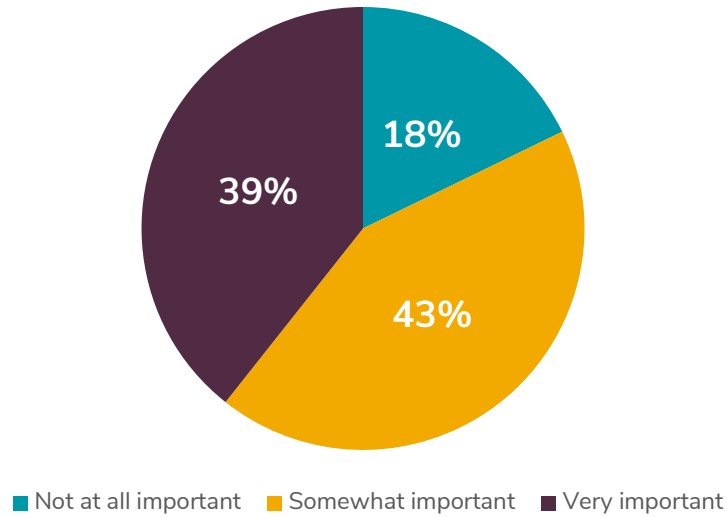
Question: How important are environmental considerations to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson? This could include factors such as wildlife conservation, water protection, impacts to animal and fish habitat, and disruption to land.



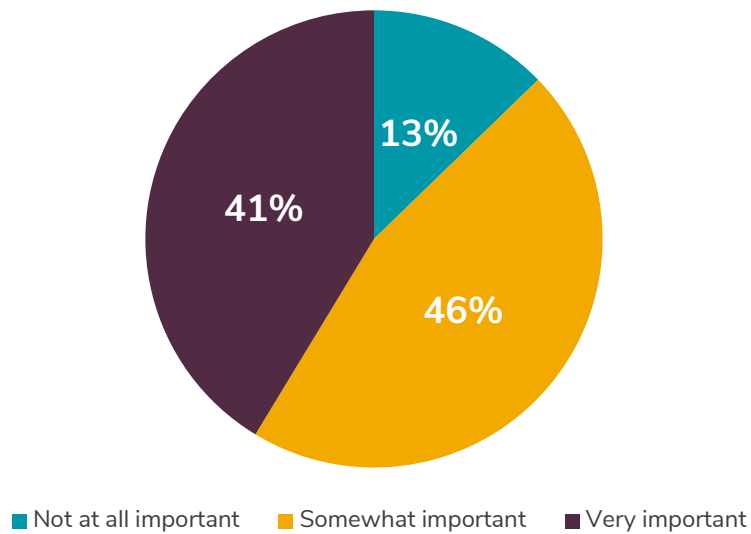
Question: How important are heritage considerations to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson? This could include factors such as historical authenticity, visual sightlines, aesthetics, impacts to cultural, archaeological and heritage sites.



Question: How important are tourism considerations to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson? This could include factors such as impacts to tourism traffic, and accessibility to West Dawson.



Question: How important are financial considerations to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson? This could include factors such as the cost of a river crossing, economic impacts to industry, and long-term financial impacts.



Additional feedback: Are there any additional factors that are important to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson?

For this question, we received 193 comments. In response to this question, we received comments addressing four factors specifically addressed in our survey:

- Financial.....17
- Environmental.....14
- Tourism..... 9
- Heritage..... 5

We also received comments addressing other considerations or areas of concern:

- Ability to access West Dawson.....53
- Safety47
- Bridge design and location options28
- Transportation infrastructure/services/utilities.....26
- Lifestyle26
- Housing/land availability20
- Economic/industry.....16
- TH involvement..... 6
- Other..... 7

Finally, we received some feedback with specific ideas about the river crossing:

- Build the bridge.....22
- No bridge 7

Quotes from participants:

- *“With an increased population on the west side emergency services are a factor. Being able to access the west side has pros and cons depending on who you talk to of course. It would mean more options for expanding Dawson.”*
- *“Heritage factors yes included the gold rush era aesthetic, but please include and prioritize traditional TH heritage and the impacts this will have on the river, the shores, and the community.”*
- *“Ferry is too expensive and leaves us without access for long periods of time. Bridge would increase tourism, access and help with mining and potential for an increase of land development.”*



- *“The crossing should remain as it is. The costs both financially as well as environmental are too much of a risk to do anything else.”*

Additional feedback: Are there any other comments or concerns you have about the future of the river crossing?

In response to this question, we received a lot of feedback about what types of crossings should be considered:

- A bridge or other fixed link..... 102
- Something else providing year-round access38
- No bridge or other fixed link36

Several respondents indicated that whatever manner of crossing exists or is built, there should preference for locals, whether that be through a bridge with tolls for non-residents, priority, or special permits for locals so that residents have certainty about access to the river crossing.

We received seven comments indicating that crossing locations other than the location of the George Black Ferry should be considered and that they’d like to have a better understanding of all options being considered.

Many respondents were concerned that increased access to West Dawson/Sunnydale would mean an irreversible change in lifestyle for residents who choose to live on the west side of the river.

Of the other comments received, respondents reiterated themes and considerations that came up in the previous question:

- Financial..... 17
- Environmental..... 16
- Housing/land availability 15
- Transportation infrastructure/services/utilities..... 13
- Safety 12
- Economic..... 11
- Other..... 10
- Tourism..... 8
- Heritage..... 7
- Lifestyle 7
- Preference for locals..... 4



Quotes from participants

- *“With a global temperature increase of 1.5 degrees looming we can’t expect to continue to have a safe ice bridge in the winter months. On top of that, we continue to burn diesel 24 hours a day all summer.”*
- *“The town would benefit from a bridge if you look at the current summer traffic tourist hurry to get into line and set there for hours when there’s a good chance they would spend more time and money in town instead of waiting there. Let alone the locals trying to get back and forth (fuel and freight especially) and winter crossing is never good because of how it always changes depending on the current channels. Dawson needs a bridge!”*
- *“I have many concerns: environmental, social, financial, community health & well-being. This appears industry-driven and will almost certainly change Dawson dramatically from the community we know and love, and I believe will have major impacts on the environment through increased industry over a wide area...I am not able to envision positive effects.”*
- *“I believe the construction of a year round bridge would be very beneficial to the residents of West Dawson, but the price tag of such a project does not match with the number of people benefiting. Unless the Top of The World Hwy remains open year round a permanent bridge is ridiculous.”*

Next steps

We thank all individuals who dedicated their time to participate in this engagement. This initial engagement has provided invaluable feedback that will serve as a resource for Government of Yukon staff and guide discussions on the future of the Yukon River crossing in Dawson City.

Determining the best path forward for the Yukon River crossing in Dawson City will require further public engagement and conversations with stakeholders. The Government of Yukon will continue to conduct project-specific discussions with impacted communities, stakeholders, and audiences as appropriate. The values and priorities identified in this engagement will help guide those conversations.

By incorporating the information gathered in this public engagement, we aim to align our projects with the values and priorities of our residents. This input will be carefully considered in how we proceed.



Appendix

Public Survey Results

Question: Are you?

	Frequency	Percent
A resident of West Dawson/Sunnydale	83	17.70
A resident of Dawson City	372	79.32
Not a Dawson area resident	14	2.99
Total	469	100.00

Question: How important to you is it to be able to cross the river in Dawson year-round?

	Frequency	Percent
Not important at all	98	21.54
Somewhat important	190	41.76
Very important	167	36.70
Total	455	100.00

Question: How satisfied are you with the current options for crossing the river in Dawson?

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all satisfied	147	32.31
Somewhat satisfied	228	50.11
Very satisfied	80	17.58
Total	455	100.00

Question: How important are environmental considerations to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson?

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all important	57	12.53
Somewhat important	144	31.65
Very important	254	55.82
Total	455	100.00

Question: How important are heritage considerations to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson?

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all important	133	29.23
Somewhat important	156	34.29
Very important	166	36.48
Total	455	100.00

Question: How important are tourism considerations to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson?

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all important	81	17.80
Somewhat important	195	42.86
Very important	179	39.34
Total	455	100.00

Question: How important are financial considerations to you as we plan for the future of a river crossing in Dawson?

	Frequency	Percent
Not at all important	58	12.75
Somewhat important	209	45.93
Very important	188	41.32
Total	455	100.00

