

SUMMER SAFETY

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FERRY DISPUTES

Mackinac Island fights for control of the cost of getting there



A Shepler's ferry leaves Mackinac Island, heading toward the mainland, on April 29. Florida billionaire David Hoffmann's company now exerts control over the entire cost of access in ways that go beyond the base ticket cost a typical visitor might pay for a day trip to Michigan's top tourist destination. Photos by Joel Bissell, MLive.com

With one company in control of both ferry lines, the island argues access should be treated more like infrastructure than tourism.

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MACKINAC ISLAND — For years, Alison Strayer's family bought commuter tickets to travel between their seasonal Mackinac Island cottage and the mainland.

This spring, she said, Arnold Transit told her they no longer qualified. What previously was a \$600 transportation expense for a family of four jumped to more than \$4,000 — the rough cost of four non-resident seasonal passes plus mainland parking.

When Strayer complained to Hoffmann Marine, the Florida-based company that now owns both Arnold Transit and Shepler's Mackinac Island Ferry, she said "they basically told us to pound sand in very corporate lingo."

"We're kind of at the mercy of those ferry companies."

Who qualifies for discounts? Who pays for parking? How much should bicycles, baggage and transportation to the dock



Visitors board the Arnold Transit Co. ferry in Mackinaw City on May 1.

cost? Should seasonal property owners be treated differently than tourists or commuters? These are all questions at the center of a much larger fight that has consumed Mackinac Island politics, reached the governor's desk and spawned a sprawling federal court battle.

GETTING THERE

Island officials and state lawmakers say Florida billionaire David Hoffmann's com-

pany now exerts control over the entire cost of access in ways that go beyond the base ticket cost a typical visitor might pay for a day trip to Michigan's top tourist destination.

In court and in public statements, island officials have consistently advanced a broader argument that the ferries are infrastructure — a type of public utility which has long provided essential transportation services, as the lifeline over water but also over land through shuttle services to the hospital, airport or grocery store.

Lawmakers have adopted that viewpoint this year as well, arguing Mackinac Island shouldn't be treated solely as a tourist attraction, but rather as a unique community connected to the mainland by transportation infrastructure.

"This isn't just taking ferries for fun," said state Sen. John Damoose, a Republican from Harbor Springs who spearheaded newly signed legislation expanding the island's power to regulate fares and other fees tied to ferry service. "This is the road to get to the island."

BEYOND THE BOAT TICKET

Ferries may be the road, but people can't drive on them. They must park somewhere. But long-time free parking ended last year in St. Ignace and Mackinaw City ferry lots.

SEE FERRY DISPUTES, A3

MICHIGAN HEALTH

Medicaid decline puzzles experts, with more losses expected

More will probably lose coverage when eligibility rules change for 2027.

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LANSING — Michigan has seen one of the largest decreases in the nation in Medicaid enrollment in recent years.

As of February, there were nearly 2.03 million Michiganders enrolled in the comprehensive safety-net insurance program for low-income people and families. That was about 235,744 fewer people, or a 10% decline, from the same month in 2020, according to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Some of the people who lost Medicaid coverage may have secured health insurance through the commercial marketplace instead, explained Dominick Pallone, executive director of the Michigan Association of Health Plans.

Others may have dropped down to a less comprehensive public program because they were no longer eligible or didn't provide the state with enough information to prove eligibility for full coverage.

However, the health insurance providers in the state collectively haven't seen a corresponding increase to explain what has happened to the Michiganders who have lost their Medicaid coverage.

"We're not exactly sure what's going on, but it's a concern for us," Pallone said. "That's kind of the core question driving us right now to work with our partners at (the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services) and other entities; how do we make our enrollment process a little bit better and how do we prevent as many people (as possible) from falling through the cracks?"

More concerning is how many more residents will lose Medicaid coverage and may wind up uninsured in 2027, when new eligibility and reporting requirements take effect.

"To see a continued loss month over month — that we're worried about, and we know those numbers will get a lot worse," Pallone said.

SEE MICHIGAN HEALTH, A2

IN YESTERDAY'S EDITION

Solar opponents raise funds for legal fight

In anticipation of ongoing legal costs, opponents of a proposed 1,900-acre solar farm in rural Ottawa County hosted a pancake breakfast fundraiser yesterday.

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