

“It’s freedom”: How a family-owned ferry business finds solace in the Bay and its community despite financial, pandemic challenges

With her head always on a swivel, eyes glued to the sea and a walkie talkie next to her chattering in the background, Maggie McDonogh’s over 30 years of captain experience shows as she operates her ferry, the Angel Island, in the San Francisco Bay.

Being the owner of the Angel Island - Tiburon Ferry Co. (AITF), she said she relishes the fact that her job is to make people happy, driving them across the Bay area from Tiburon toward the historic Angel Island.

Being a 4th generation owner and captain of the ferry service, there is a storied history to her family’s business, one built from the ground up by Maggie’s father, Milton McDonogh, in the 1950’s and 60’s.

“He was one of these people that could handle anything,” Maggie said.

Although their family has become a staple of the local community in Marin County, San Francisco, it hasn’t always been smooth sailing for AITF.

Like the rest of the world, their business faced the brunt of the pandemic the last few years, having to shut down service for a few months in 2020. In addition, they have made adjustments to make their ferries more environmentally-friendly, a process that Maggie said has been costly and complex, despite its necessity.

During the height of the pandemic, AITF ridership dramatically declined, similar to the ridership numbers of many of the other ferry businesses in the Bay area. Ridership had been at 62,000 people in 2019 and dropped to around 25,000 in 2020, Ashley Kristensen, operations manager for AITF, said.

The pandemic was difficult for the company, Maggie said, requiring emotional and sometimes heartbreaking conversations with crew members while people navigated their individual financial situations. But for her, all that mattered was the health and safety of her crew.

“We have longevity here because we really are a family business,” Maggie said.

“Somebody gets sick, we go take care of them.”

As the 2020 lockdowns forced everyone indoors, the ferry service took a few months to perform maintenance and figure out a safety plan for when they would eventually be operational again.

Both Kristensen and Maggie said the company typically takes people from all over the globe to Angel Island, as many people come into the Bay area for the first time and want to see the state park. However, as they reopened in June of 2020, locals from Marin County flocked to the sea as people sought an escape.

“We were able to provide relief to people,” Maggie said.

She remembers a man during that time period boarding the ferry with his son. She said his only request of her was that his son could get some fresh air.

“It was almost like therapy,” Becky McDonogh, a deckhand of the Angel Island and Maggie’s daughter, said. “A little break from reality.”

Even before the locals sought refuge from the monotony of the lockdown lifestyle, the ferry and its company had been a source of comfort for the community.

“If you go to just about anybody’s house in Marin that’s been here for any period of time and beyond, you’ll see this great green railing in some picture somewhere,” Maggie said, pointing to the green cover piece outlining the top of the upper deck’s hand railing. “You get to be a part of people’s lives.”

The California Air Resources Board is [now requiring in-use short-run ferry vessels](#), like that operated by AITF, to be zero-emissions by the end of 2025. In preparation for this deadline, AITF announced they plan to have their main Angel Island ferry be fully electric by 2024.

Although the announcement to move to all-electric came after the mandate, Maggie said the company had started working on the plan two years prior.

She said funding is one of the most difficult aspects of this transition, as securing grants is harder for privately-owned businesses.

For AITF, she said the conversion from diesel to electric costs approximately 3.5 to 4.5 million dollars, with support from the government of up to about 75-80%. In addition, the company only gets reimbursed after the project, so the company is carrying these large loans.

Additionally, the process of making the transition to a greener vessel takes years of work, including getting the boat approved by the Coast Guard.

Maggie's role, in pursuit of this goal, has changed, as she now spends more time in the office attempting to garner grants and ensure the boat's infrastructure will meet all the regulations.

Despite the challenges, Maggie said it is extremely important to her to ensure the business is environmentally-friendly,

“If we can make it cleaner for everybody else, so people aren't affected by air pollution or chemicals, that's a good thing,” Maggie said. “I'm protecting the kids that ride it (the ferry) and the adults.”

Maggie's family has always lived on the sea.

Her father Milton McDonogh, Maggie said, built the very boardwalk people use to get on the ferry. His passion for the ferry business continued with Maggie and eventually her children, Sam and Becky. Sam works as a captain on the boat seasonally and Becky currently works as a deckhand.

Becky is in the process of becoming a captain, learning under the wing of her mother, who she considers her best friend. She would be a fifth generation operator of the ferry vessel, hoping to continue the tradition of making people happy through a ferry adventure to Angel Island.

Despite the challenges of operating a business on the sea, whether it's a worldwide pandemic or creating new all-electric infrastructure for the ferry, Maggie and Becky said they love what they do each and every day.

“You can’t imagine you would do anything else,” Becky said. “It’s freedom.”