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***Cumberland* refit gives ferry riders fits**

The two-month refit of the *Queen of Cumberland*, and its replacement with the *Bowen Queen*, a much smaller ferry, is causing overloads like never before, particularly for traffic between Otter Bay, Pender Island, and Swartz Bay. The ill-publicized vessel change was worst when it began the day after the Thanksgiving holiday. That week, traffic was left behind on morning sailings to Swartz and both evening sailings, forcing people to overnight on Vancouver Island.

Since then, successful ferry users are learning to arrive much, much earlier, and put up with getting home later. Ferry crews have used great ingenuity to pack more cars on the ferries, in what must be a stressful period for them.

The *Bowen Queen* is the only replacement ferry available for the Southern Gulf Islands Route N^o5 and the *Queen of Cumberland* is not due back into service until December 16. So, travelers from all Islands are making adjustments in order to get through the long period of restricted service, including the Christmas shopping season!

Passengers have suggested a daily water taxi run to help commuters get to work and free parking at Swartz Bay for those able to leave cars on the Vancouver Island side. Up till the beginning of November, there was no response from the ferry corporation. Although, for those who were left behind on a final evening sailing, free parking in the upper lot was offered to those who asked.

BC Ferries has been monitoring the overloads, and the situation was the main topic of discussion at the SGI ferry advisory committee meeting on October 29. The worst overloads occur at Otter Bay on Thursdays. Evening overloads at 6:30pm are confined to Otter Bay as Galiano travellers load first and as few as 30 Pender vehicles have been able to load.

On October 14, the first Thursday morning with the smaller ferry, the 7:45am from Otter Bay left 23 vehicles,

the 9:30am left 25 vehicles, and the 11:45am left 14 vehicles. Returning to Otter Bay on October 14, the 6:30pm left 21 vehicles at Swartz Bay, and the 7:40pm left 3 vehicles. Since then, no vehicles have been marooned at Swartz Bay overnight—largely because people are staying home whenever they can.

However overloads are not the major problem. If it is not possible to stay home, as one commuter who needs a car for Vancouver Island travel says, 'arriving at 5:10pm for the 6:30pm ferry has only guaranteed me a trip on the 7:40pm ferry ... similar wait times in the morning ... which means that there have been days where my total commute time for one day was 6.5 hours—hardly ideal for someone with family.'

For those still travelling, the weekday problem is the number of vehicles; there's still enough room for foot passengers; this suggests that car pooling would be a practical idea, though terminal wait times would not be reduced. Weekend travel to town may be an option, though this does not work for medical appointments.

Travellers from other Southern Islands can help with Pender's overload problem. The 6:30pm from Swartz Bay to Pender is the worst situation; Galiano travelers could help by reducing the number of cars on this sailing. Similar strategies could be used from Saturna in the morning.

Stop press: BC Ferries spokesperson Deborah Marshall says that Pender Island travellers can have free overnight parking at Swartz Bay at any time. Get a parking pass from the Swartz Bay ticket booth, for the south end of the parking lot, expiry December 20.

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