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Ferry Act changes raise same old questions

On May 9, the BC government introduced amendments to the *Coastal Ferry Act*, in response to the independent BC Ferry Commissioner's review. Announced is an increase of \$79.5 million, over four years, in the government's financial contribution to BC Ferries. Transportation and Infrastructure Minister Blair Lekstrom states in a press release: 'The legislation introduced today builds upon the BC Ferry Commissioner's report and the concerns that the public have expressed about the affordability of BC Ferries.'

However, the new legislation also requires that BC Ferries find efficiencies to reduce operating costs, so there will be 'adjustments to service levels'. Future capital spending will look at providing greater inter-operability of ferries between routes, reducing operating costs by implementing new technologies, like LNG-fuelled and cable ferries, and allowing for alternative methods to connect coastal communities, such as passenger-only ferries.

'The good news is the government decided they need to put in more money than they have been,' comments Ferry Advisory Committee Chair Brian Hollingshead. 'But, I don't think there will be enough money.'

A \$25 million portion of the funds will go into last year's revenues; and as fares are already set for this year, it will do nothing to improve affordability. It will amount to an annual funding increase of \$11 million during the final three years of the agreement, whereas BC Ferries' shortfall is anticipated to be around \$58 million, says Hollingshead.

North Island MLA Claire Trevena says the amendments are 'very bad news' for people living on the islands. 'Simply put, it ignores the countless pleas of those who presented to the Ferry Commissioner when he toured the province last fall. Instead of freezing and rolling back fares, it will allow for fare increases and for frequency of service to be downgraded. It does not acknowledge that ferries are part of our highway system.'

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