

# Reprint Island Tides

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## Fare increases *and* service reductions?

Patrick Brown

The Ferry Commissioner has set ferry fare increases for the next three years at 4.1% in April 2013, 4.0% in April 2014, and 3.9% in April 2015. This adds up to 12.5% over the next three years.

These caps apply to all routes, unlike increases for previous years, which usually specified higher percentage increases for minor and northern routes than for the main routes. This is a result of changes this year in the *Coastal Ferry Act*; it now allows a degree of cross-subsidization between routes.

These fare increases are lower than anticipated, thanks to an increase in the provincial government subsidy. However, the government also expects that costs will be cut as a result of reducing service on a number of routes.

The government has proposed special attention to routes with utilization below 55%, or round trips with utilization of 20% or less. Specifically, consideration may be given to the elimination of one round trip per day for part of the year on routes 6, 7, 8, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24 and 26 (see chart, page 3).

These are primarily simple routes, providing back and forth service between two ports. The three northern routes, 10, 11, and 40, serving Port Hardy, Prince Rupert and Skidegate, will also come in for special attention.

Information from an earlier Transportation Minister appeared to exclude the Southern Gulf Islands (Routes 4, 5, 9) and the Duke Point–Tsawwassen Route 30 from service cuts. Conversely, recent indications from the new Transportation Minister, Mary Polak, are that no routes will be excluded from consideration of service cuts, and, according to BC Ferries, a number of cuts on main routes have already been made in the winter schedule.

The suggestion of possible

service cuts is the only result of the government's review of a number of recommendations arising from an extensive study carried out by the Ferry Commissioner earlier this year. That study saw the Commissioner holding public meetings on Islands throughout the ferry system area.

### More Consultations

The government now proposes to hold a further series of public consultation meetings. When they were first announced this summer, their objective was said to be part of 'the government's commitment to seek public input on strategies to support a long-term vision of connecting coastal communities in an affordable, efficient and sustainable manner'. The use of the term 'sustainable' here appears to refer to the profitability of the ferry routes, rather than the sustainability of the communities.

However, given increasing emphasis on service cuts, it may

now be that Masset Mayor Andrew Merrilees has a more accurate concept of the purpose of the consultations. To quote him: 'We need more than a consultation for a preconceived outcome. They are not looking at new models; they are just looking at ways to slash services.'

The consultations will be carried out at a cost of \$594,000 by Kirk & Co Consulting Limited. Kirk & Co is headed by Judy Kirk, who was executive director of the BCLiberal caucus from 1994-1996. The firm, which has conducted similar work for BC Hydro, TransLink and the City of Vancouver, won the contract in competition with eight other organizations.

The consultation work was originally scheduled to

### Routes & Capacity Utilization, 2011

Rte 1	Swartz Bay–Tsawwassen	77%
Rte 12	Mill Bay–Brentwood Bay	75%
Rte 2	Horseshoe Bay–Departure Bay	61%
Rte 3	Langdale–Horseshoe Bay	56%
Rte 4	Fulford Harbour–Swartz Bay	56%
Rte 8	Horseshoe Bay–Bowen Island	53%
Rte 30	Duke Point–Tsawwassen	51%
Rte 19	Nanaimo Harbour–Gabriola Is.	48%
Rte 11	Skidegate–Prince Rupert	48%
Rte 24	Quadra Island–Cortes Island	47%
Rte 23	Campbell River–Quadra Island	45%
Rte 9	Tsawwassen–Long Harbour	44%
Rte 10	Port Hardy–Prince Rupert	44%
Rte 21	Buckley Bay–Denman West	41%
Rte 22	Denman East–Hornby Island	41%
Rte 5	Swartz Bay–Southern Gulf Is.	40%
Rte 25	Port McNeill–Alert Bay	38%
Rte 6	Crofton–Vesuvius Bay	38%
Rte 17	Little River–Powell River	34%
Rte 20	Chemainus–Thetis Island	30%
Rte 40	Port Hardy–Mid-coast	30%
Rte 7	Earls Cove–Saltery Bay	28%
Rte 18	Texada–Powell River	26%
Rte 26	Skidegate–Alliford Bay	22%

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start in August, but now is expected to take place this fall and winter. The Ferry Advisory Committee Chairs have requested a meeting with the consultants in order to assist them in identifying the issues that might be raised. Kirk has not responded to *Island Tides'* request for an interview about the consultation process.

The continuing and relentless increases in ferry fares over the past ten years since the ferries were 'privatized' have probably contributed to the steady reduction in ridership and to increasing operating losses at BC Ferries. NDP Ferry Critic Gary Coons has also criticized the ferries for increasing their 'cruise ship tourism product' beyond what was required for a ferry service that is part of the highway network.

He says: 'Since Day One, we had a social and economic contract with the communities that depend on the ferries for goods and services. We have got to get back to that and treat it like an essential link.' 