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## Ferries consultation plan falls short

A public consultation and engagement process on the future of coastal ferry service in BC is now underway in coastal communities until mid-December. The goals of the 'engagement' are to explain to ferry-riders why \$26 million must be cut from the service and to seek input for the design of a future ferry service.

The Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MOTI) says \$26 million must be saved in four years, mainly through service cuts. However no specific cuts have yet been put forward and it is unlikely cuts will be named until after the May 2013 provincial election. Of the consultation's second goal, MOTI's says, that it seeks suggestions for a 'long-term vision for an affordable and sustainable coastal ferry service.'

Ferry Advisory Committee Chairs (FACC), who represent coastal ferry-users, say the current consultation process is confusing, rushed, and missing important information. 'Yes, it's worth discussing the Province's two stated goals: how to save money, and a long-term vision for coastal transportation,' says Harold Swierenga, chair of Salt Spring Island Ferry Advisory Commission (FAC). 'But there are many holes and questionable assumptions in the picture of the situation as it's being presented.'

For example, the consultation doesn't mention that fares are

'past the tipping point', say the FACC. However, BC Ferry Services insists that increased fares are not causing a decline in ridership, citing the failure of the CoastSaver promotion to increase traffic, and the fact that ridership is also down on the free inland ferries.

But fares keep rising. Despite Ferry Commissioner Macatee's recommendation to limit annual fare increases to the 2% inflation rate, fare hikes of 4% were announced last month. To achieve the 2% cap, the FACC say the Province would have to 'fill up some of the hole it created over the eight years it froze the funding it gives ferry service.'

Discussion of the coastal ferries as an extension of the highway system is also ignored, Ferry Advisory Committee Chairs say.

'There's no explanation of why the Province treats coastal ferries differently from other basic transportation infrastructure,' says John Hodgkins, chair of Gabriola FAC. 'This raises the question of what should be the Province's role in coastal ferries. That's not asked in the consultation, but it's an important question.'

Further, the FACC say previous government announcements led coastal ferry users to expect consultation on specific cuts and cost-saving measures.

'Instead, we have the process just announced. There is no commitment to come back and consult on specifics when they're finally decided. Without that step, the Province is flying blind. It won't know what the cuts will do to ferry users and communities,' says Brian Hollingshead, chair of the Southern Gulf Islands FAC. 'Is this effective consultation?'

With respect to timing, the FACC were invited to a meeting with the consultants and the Province less than two weeks before the consultation announcement. They had many concerns, but only a few of their recommendations were accepted. The consultation team *was* persuaded to add more communities to its meeting list, but there are still gaps. Some potentially affected communities won't get a visit, and will have to rely on the internet, which is often inadequate in many coastal communities.

'But most importantly,' says Tony Law, chair of Hornby-

### What Are Ferry Advisory Committees?

- Advisory committees have been operating on individual islands since the late 1980s. Committee members are all volunteers, appointed in cooperation with local government, Islands Trust and First Nations. More than 110 people serve on Ferry Advisory Committees (FAC).
- Ferry Advisory Committee goals are to promote reliable, affordable, viable, safe coastal ferry service.
- 13 FAC represent coastal communities served by BC Ferries' 22 non-major routes. Within each community, the FAC spearheads discussion about the many facets of life affected by ferry service.
- Since the early 2000s committee chairpersons have come together as an ad hoc inter-Island committee (FACC) to act as spokespersons between islands and with the ferry corporation.

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Denman FAC, 'there is little time to let people absorb very complex information, and to look for other information they may need to give thoughtful, useful responses and ask questions that need to be asked.'

With costs continually rising, especially fuel, it is inevitable that coastal ferry users will have to accept some service changes. But, as the FACC said in response to Commissioner Macatee's recent *Coastal Ferry Act Review*, service cuts are only acceptable if the provincial government does its part, and increases its financial contribution to adequately support the coastal ferry system.

The FACC consider government contribution to be adequate if it brings fares back from the tipping point. That would require an initial fare roll-back, to create a sustainable baseline for inflation-indexed increases.

'Only this method will restore traffic to levels that will support the system,' said Chair of Northern Sunshine Coast FAC, Bill Cripps. 'We realize the provincial treasury has many demands on it, but we believe adequate support for ferries is critical for economic investment. Given that economic growth depends on solid transportation infrastructure, adequate ferry support underpins the Premier's jobs plan.'

A discussion guide and feedback form will be available at the meetings and online at [www.coastalferriesengagement.ca](http://www.coastalferriesengagement.ca) (for meeting dates, see ad page 9). 

## Who Are The FAC Chairs?

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