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## **Ferries consultation: participants question and correct data**

**Patrick Brown**

The latest BC Ferries' consultation roadshow has been visiting the Southern Gulf Islands over the past few weeks. The Ministry of Transportation awarded a \$594,000 contract to consulting firm Kirk & Co to hold the consultation, and the result is well-organized meetings that provide participants with an extensive presentation, in book form, displays, and on the Internet, outlining the relative utilization and profitability (or losses) of every route in the BC Ferries system.

The Ministry suggested that over the next four years, in order to balance the Province's increase in the BC Ferries contract payment of \$79.5 million (the first such increase since the ferry system was 'privatized'), some \$30 million in ferry system cost-savings or additional revenue was needed. This could well be achieved by service cutbacks—\$4 million had already been identified from main route trip cancellations.

The panel included Kevin Richter, Assistant Deputy Minister of Transportation, and BC Ferries representatives.

At press time, meetings have been held on Salt Spring, Cortes, Gabriola, Kuper, Thetis, Pender, Salt Spring and Galiano, as well as in Nanaimo and Victoria. Meetings to come are on Quadra, Mayne, Saturna, Texada, Hornby, Denman and Victoria (see ad, page 9).

So far, attendance at these meetings is substantially less than at the consultation, nearly a year ago, held by the BC Ferry Commissioner. Pender Island and Gabriola meetings each attracted some 40 participants.

At the Gabriola meeting, Gabriola Ferry Advisory Committee Chair John Hodgkins said a fundamental review of the ferry system was needed and said that the current consultation process was 'likely to miss the point'.

### **Shortfall Questioned**

At the Pender meeting, Chair of the Southern Gulf Islands Ferry Committee, Brian Hollingshead, expressed the opinion that the object of the data presented was to show the Province as being generous benefactors, by publicizing the 'shortfall' *per vehicle carried*. However, he noted that this calculation did not take into account passenger revenue and costs; if this had been done, the 'shortfall' would be significantly less. On one northern route the 'shortfall' would not be \$2,300 per vehicle, but \$1,000.

### **Subsidy Numbers Corrected**

Hollingshead also pointed out that the '\$79.5 million government contribution' included a previous \$25 million payment, so the actual additional annual contribution to operating costs is only \$11 million per year, on an existing subsidy of \$91 million per year.

There were many comments on the effect of high ferry fares and service reductions on Island businesses. Glenn Grimmer commented on the difficulty of transporting ready-mix concrete to other Islands, and of taking livestock off-island for slaughter. Jill Justice made a number of suggestions for changes in vessels and homeports when the *Queen of Nanaimo* is replaced in 2016.

### **Ferry Union Questions Data**

BC Ferry Workers Union is also calling into question the accuracy of data that is being used to decide the need for service reduction, in particular ferry capacities. An example cites *MV Howe Sound Queen*, in service on Route 6 (Vesuvius–Crofton). The 'official' vehicle capacity of *Howe Sound Queen* is given in the government's data as 70 Automobile Equivalent Units in the Coastal Ferry Service Contract. However, the current HSQ Vessel Specific Manual identifies the capacity as 55 units. ✍