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Ferries belong to the Islands

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Delegation to the Ministry of Transportation's BC Ferries consultation, presented on November 14.

I have been a ferry rider, in the Southern Gulf Islands and the Sunshine Coast, for 25 years. I served on various ferry committees for Pender and Southern Gulf Islands (SGI), 15-20 years ago. I have written regularly about ferries in *Island Tides* regional newspaper for 25 years.

Talk About BC Communities, Not Ferries

There has been much talk from the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure on the 'sustainability' of the ferry service, with particular reference to the minor routes. This is a single bottom line approach: oversimplified, narrow and wrong.

What we are actually talking about here is the sustainability of many island communities, of which the ferry services are an integral part. Those island communities include the community of Vancouver Island, the Islands of the Georgia Strait, Haida Gwaii, and those 'islanded' parts of the mainland—the Sunshine Coast and the Central Coast.

BC Ferries is, in fact, the transportation infrastructure on which a quarter of BC depends.

Consider Diversity & Needs

The Ministry's approach—to look for public input which might lead to a saving of \$26 million over the next four years, reveals the limits of government thinking—which is still dominated by the idea that BC Ferries is an independent corporation from which profits are expected, albeit government owned.

It's that frame of reference that has led, and continues to lead, to steady increases in ferry fares over the last ten years, and promised future increases. This attitude has led to a continuing attack on all those communities, the cost of living in them and visiting them—effectively isolating them. Again, I include Vancouver Island.

The consultation needs to consider: 1) the entire ferry community, not just the ferry corporation. Ferries are an integral part of the communities, and 2) every community is different, has different needs and is affected differently by its ferries.

Ferries A Part Of Each Community

Let's look at how the ferries affect the communities to which they belong, of which they are a part. Not just in terms of economics, but socially and environmentally. Island residents, business owners, farmers, and property owners have little choice

in the face of increasing travel costs, BC Ferries being a monopoly. They sell up and move away from the Islands.

On Pender, we have many properties for sale. Many have sold. Many long-time residents have sold to mainlanders who use the properties as vacation homes. The normal slow and steady growth of the community is hampered by the perception that fares are too high and will continue to rise. Except, of course, that it's not just a perception; it's a promise. And that promise holds for the coastal quarter of BC.

Despite this, the Pender community remains strong. We have, fortunately, many young families. We have many retirees. Not much in between. It's a great community to live in, but a hard place to make a living.

The increasing percentage of 'weekenders'—users of vacation properties—also affects ferries. And every Island is different. Pender looks to Vancouver Island. Galiano looks to the mainland. Geography, and the patterns of ferry use which result, make that difference. So the ferries belong to the island communities.

Comments on Discussion Points

Changes to Service: It is not clear when during the four years that \$26 million is to be saved or what the potential savings from any particular service cuts might be. Also what are the details of the government's claimed \$79.5 million input?

Only service reductions are considered. How about increases? If you look at the communities, and not just BC Ferries' bottom line, you could come to different conclusions.

I recall many efforts to modify schedules in SGI to reduce runs and costs. The only good way was to base ferries on the islands rather than at Swartz Bay. This required moving crews to the islands, which was not acceptable. But why not?

Route 5, because of its complexity, is very difficult to change; it has taken many years to work out. Route 9 is simpler, but still hard to change, because of its high weekend and summer load factors. We still need more inter-island trips both for social and economic reasons.

Utilization: On Routes 5 and 9, summer Friday night and Sunday night traffic dictates the size of the ferries assigned to serve the Southern Gulf Islands. Weekday and winter utilization is low.

This is disguised by the aggregated utilization figures which

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the Minister sees and which you have presented to us as justification for cutting service. For all we know, you may not have examined them any more deeply than the Minister has.

A 'Popularity Poll': In your literature, you have presented a sort of popularity poll, with oversimplified solutions and boxes for us to check our likes and dislikes. This is an insult to Islanders' intelligence. I can only think that the results are intended to be used to justify government policy, or to present an election platform which will also be an insult to intelligence.

Ask a silly question, you will get silly answers—which lead to silly government policy. These rating charts are really intended to determine which alternative would produce the least political damage.

This methodology is inappropriate for a complex situation that affects people's lives directly and significantly.

Some Considerations In Cost Saving

Cable Ferries: won't save money, will require just as many crew, and work against the ferry commissioner's recommendation of vessel standardization.

Passenger-only Ferries: must have either parking lots or transit as well. Will require just as many crew if they carry the same number of passengers. Overall, savings are problematical, though transit on islands would be a significant change.

Bridges: costly. Islands Trust, representing Islanders, opposes any bridges.

LNG: fuelling installation expensive and natural gas price volatile over the long run. Savings doubtful except for new vessels.

Standardization of Vessel Types: good idea, but German-built ferries are unsuitable.

Community Contribution: as they are unavoidable, ferry fares are already a tax on islanders who must travel on ferries. This proposal simply extends that tax to islanders who don't use the ferries much.

Service Reductions: on winter weekdays, you could take an entire shift and round trip off Route 9 (Tsawwassen–Gulf Islands). But consider effect on communities, particularly Galiano. Can the vessel be used for any other run? Doubtful. And it reduces inter-island travel even further.

Crew Size Reductions: on low-utilization trips this might lead to turning away passengers.

Pricing And Fares: the Experience Card was one of the best ideas anyone has had in a long time. I suggest using it to sell monthly, six-month, and annual passes, with the discount varying depending on the period of commitment. Price of pass calculated on a multiplier of the savings on an average number of trips, so essentially, it is a discount which increases depending on how many trips you take. This might increase travel in low-utilization periods.

BC Ferries might also run a lottery, with a relatively high chance of winning; prizes would be passes.

Change Ownership & BCFS Board

This spring, the BC Government introduced changes to the *Business Corporations Act* defining a social enterprise. BC Ferries is an excellent candidate for this structure.

The government's press release on social enterprises says: 'Community contribution companies would be structured to combine both benefits to the community and limited investor returns within the context of a traditional for-profit company. They would be incorporated with the flexibility and certainty of regular companies, but under legislation that ensures they primarily benefit the community. These companies would allow an alternative business model not currently available through a regular business.' Community benefit would be as important as profit.

The structure of BC Ferries was changed 10 years ago. It can change again. In this case, the make-up of the BCFS board should be changed to: 1/3 ministry (government ownership, with subsidy increased and continuing), 1/3 employees, and 1/3 communities.

This is the level on which we must think to create a ferry service which is embedded in its communities and makes them and itself sustainable.

Island communities and their ferries are the jewel of British Columbia and need far-thinking support. ☞