

# Reprint Island Tides

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## Ferries plan open-deck ships for Routes 9 and 17

Patrick Brown

BC Ferries is seeking public input on the design and operation of new ferries that will replace the aging vessels on Route 9 (Tsawwassen to the Gulf Islands) and Route 17 (Powell River to Little River (Comox)). These two routes are presently served by the sisterships *Queen of Nanaimo* and *Queen of Burnaby*, which are substantial closed-deck single-ended ships, built in 1964 and 1965 respectively, and nearing the end of their useful life.

Route 17 (*Queen of Burnaby*) makes four round trips each day between Westview (Powell River) and Little River (Comox).

Route 9 (*Queen of Nanaimo*) traffic loads are heavily seasonal, with vehicle space completely reserved on summer weekends. To take the extra traffic, the *Bowen Queen*, a double-ended open deck ferry, with a capacity of 70 vehicles and about 400 passengers, is used on part of the route in the summer (Tsawwassen to Salt Spring).

In the winter (except Christmas), the *Queen of Nanaimo* has very light loads, even on weekends. Linking all the southern Gulf Islands (Galiano, Mayne, Pender, Salt Spring, and Saturna which is connected in through Mayne Island) with Tsawwassen, *Queen of Nanaimo* makes two round trips each day.

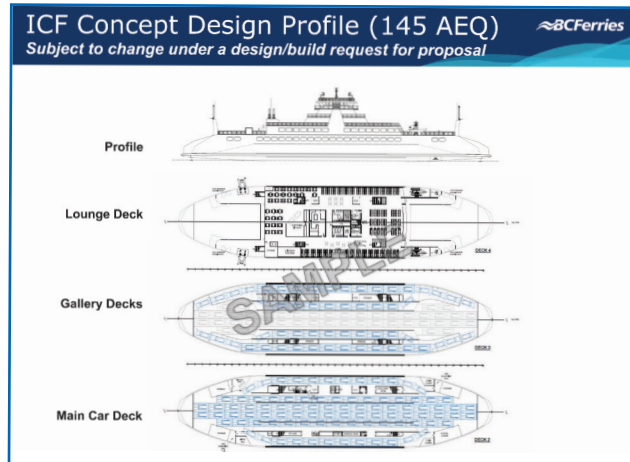
BC Ferries planners calculate that the peak loads

for both routes could be handled with three new 'intermediate' vessels (ICFs): one to be assigned to Route 17 year-round (145 cars), one to serve Route 9 year-round (145 cars), and the third to supplement Route 9 in the summer and shoulder seasons (120 cars), and serve as a substitute vessel for refits. In the interests of a move to standardize ferry types, the three would be similar open-deck double-ended vessels.

It is this strategy, and the design of the new vessels, that BC Ferries put forward for comment at a series of public meetings, held on the Southern Gulf Islands, Salt Spring, Richmond, Courtenay, Powell River and Texada, between April 22 and May 2.



Island Sky with fixed upper decks



Some Specs	Queen of Nanaimo ICF Design(est)	
Length overall	130 m	100 m
Max. Displacement	4,542 tonnes	3,500 tonnes
Car capacity	192	125 - 145
Passenger capacity	996	585

### Vessel Design

The conceptual design of the new vessels sets the pattern for more series of similar intermediate-sized ferries to be built over the decades. A common design will enable increased flexibility in vessel assignment, and the standardization of propulsion systems, controls, and many operational facilities.

Drawing on experience with *Queen of Cumberland*, *Queen of Capilano*, and the more recently constructed *Island Sky* (Vancouver built, it operates on Route 7 across Jarvis Inlet, connecting the two halves of the Sunshine Coast), the new design calls for a double-ended open-deck ferry on a common hull design, with two drive units at

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Island Tides Publishing Ltd, Box 55, Pender Island, BC V0N 2M0 • 250-629-3660 • [islandtides@islandtides.com](mailto:islandtides@islandtides.com) • [www.islandtides.com](http://www.islandtides.com)

each end. The vehicle capacity would be 85 on the main deck, a further 40 on fixed gallery decks attached to the side superstructure, and, if necessary, a further 20 on movable platforms attached to the inside superstructure. BC Ferries have emphasized that the final design and arrangement of vehicle decks provides an opportunity for design innovation by the successful shipbuilder. The lounge and all passenger facilities would be on a single level above the vehicle decks, with two elevators.

### Why Now?

Some questioned the timing of the meetings, immediately before a provincial election in which the ferry service is inevitably an issue. The answer lies in an overall schedule which aims to have the new vessels in service in 2016 and the spring of 2017. The meetings could not be held earlier, it was explained, because they would have conflicted with a more general public consultation process last winter (which aimed to find, through service cuts and other changes, some \$26 million in savings over the next three years).

The overall timeline allows time for the Ferry Commissioner to pass judgment on the capital cost, strategy and conceptual design of the new ferries, as required by Section 55 of the *Coastal Ferry Act*. The Ferry Commissioner will also provide an opportunity for public comment during his evaluation of the plan in the summer of 2013.

Following a positive decision from the Commissioner, BC Ferries intends to solicit design-build proposals from interested shipbuilders worldwide, with the expected award of a contract by the end of 2013.

### Issues

Participants at the Pender Island meeting expressed concern about a few major issues.

**Open-deck ferries**—much concern was expressed about the operation of open-deck ferries in rough weather in the Strait of Georgia. The *Queen of Nanaimo* seldom misses a sailing, crossing the Strait in winds up to 40 knots; the *Queen of Burnaby* tends to stay in port if winds are over 25 knots (with a southeaster, the increased fetch results in greater wave height further north). It was noted that the conceptual design included ‘visors’ which would be closed on each end of the ferries, to reduce salt spray on the main vehicle deck, but it was not clear how well these would work in winter storms.

**Capacity** – BC Ferries have made projections of traffic for the first ten years of operation (until 2027) and, based on forecast traffic increases of 1.8% per year, anticipate that the

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capacity will be sufficient to satisfy 93% of peak demand, with all overloads accommodated by the end of the day.

**Schedules** – A key issue, of course, is the schedule, particularly Route 9 on summer weekends. With two vessels of similar capacity, there is a possibility that instead of servicing four ports, each vessel might service two, simplifying and speeding up operation significantly (an extension of the role that the *Bowen Queen* now fills). One vessel would be based at Long Harbour, and one at Tsawwassen.

### Inter-Island Travel

The expansion of the reduced ports-of-call program would increase lift-off, (including seasonal flexibility) and shorten travel times to and from Tsawwassen. However, it would affect inter-island connections.

At present, Route 9 is an integral part of available travel between the Gulf Islands, in both winter and summer. It links in with Route 5 (*Cumberland*) and 5A (*Mayne Queen*) to provide varied and almost adequate trip opportunities.

This schedule is vital to island businesses with customers on more than one island, and for inter-island contact, events, and visitor travel. It was eroded when BC Ferries changed to a weekend lift-off concept in the early 1990s. It remains to be seen

how much further it will be eroded by an expanded double vessel system. Given the recent Southern Islands economic development initiatives, such as the recently funded ‘Experience The Gulf Island’s project, scheduling will need to be considered.

No details of schedules were discussed at the Pender meeting, except for the general thought that two vessels would provide more and shorter trips and

better capacity from Tsawwassen through-out the summer and shoulder seasons.

**Food Services & Amenities**– BC Ferries identify four levels of food services, or ‘customer amenities’. In BC Ferries terminology, Level 1 is a Snack Bar; Level 4 is a full cafeteria with retail shop. Given the length of the trip (for some travellers) to and from Tsawwassen, preference was expressed for a full cafeteria, with hot breakfasts, burgers, salads, etc for the trip across the Strait. This level of service currently makes money on Route 9, though not on Route 17.

To accomplish an appropriate level of food services both one larger and the smaller vessel would need an appropriate and up-

### Program Timelines

#### Planning, Design Build

Public input to Section 55 proposal	May/June 2013
Section 55 filed with Commissioner	May 22, 2013
Section 55 Commissioner decision	Summer 2013
Issue design-build RFP	Summer 2013
Award vessel design-build contract	End 2013
Build vessels	Dec 2013–Dec 2016

#### Vessels in service

Route 17 (145 cars)	April 2016
Route 9 (145 cars)	October 2016
Route 9 (125 cars)	April 2017

front cafeteria design program, including consideration of necessary sprinkler system, crewing facilities, and similar criteria.

### **Feedback And Comment**

These meetings are the first opportunity for public comment on the plan to replace the Route 9 and Route 17 ships. It is inevitable that further concerns will arise. The BC Ferries working group can be reached at: [vesselreplacement@bcferries.com](mailto:vesselreplacement@bcferries.com). All input received will be included in the proposal to the Ferry Commissioner. The Ferry Commissioner, in the process of his Section 55 review of the proposal, will invite public comment.

BCFerries anticipates future discussions on schedules and customer amenities, but not until after the shipbuilding contract is awarded. This may work for scheduling but is hardly likely to have a good result for food services and amenities. While a cruise ship is not required, Route N<sup>o</sup>9 is the only route on the ferry system that cannot be built quite like a bus. ☞

*Ed's Note: In our next edition we will report on the meetings held further north in the Strait of Georgia and the issues arising.*