BC Ferries’ plan to replace the Queen of Burnaby on the Comox-Powell River route (Route 17) ran into stiff opposition at public meetings in Powell River and on Texada Island, May 1 and 2.

BC Ferries is proposing to build an open deck vessel, similar to the MV Island Sky, to replace the 192-vehicle closed deck Burnaby. The design of the new vessel calls for a basic 85 vehicle main deck that can be increased to 125 with side gallery decks and further increased to 145 by adding movable platforms.

BC Ferries plans to build an identical vessel to replace the closed-deck Queen of Nanaimo for the Southern Gulf Islands–Tsawwassen (Route 9), and a third vessel, without movable platforms, to serve as a high-season supplemental for Route 9 and a relief vessel for both routes.

Opposition was primarily directed at the choice of a much smaller open-deck vessel that many feel will not be suitable for crossing Georgia Strait in heavy weather.

Bill Cripps, chair of the Northern Sunshine Coast Ferry Advisory Committee was one of many speakers stating that the new vessel would be too small, citing stats that showed Queen of Burnaby carried as many as 191 vehicles in 2011 and had 32 loads of more than 140 in 2012. Cripps stated that BC Ferries should not be considering any vessel with a capacity less than 165 vehicles.

Several speakers questioned the wisdom of BC Ferries basing traffic projections on a record low year and assuming virtually no growth. A more affordable fare structure and/or minor growth would make such a new 40-year vessel too small almost immediately.

Passenger capacity was also mentioned as a concern as the maximum passenger capacity of the new vessels will be 585, much lower than the Burnaby and the Nanaimo which can be licensed for 1250. The lower capacity increases the chance of vessels sailing with empty deck space and a full parking lot on shore when the passenger license is reached via walk-ons alone, a situation that most island residents have been frustrated with at least once.

A life extension for the Burnaby was not the option of choice among the residents at the meetings, although it was pointed out at the Powell River event that Black Ball Ferry Line is still running the precursor of the Burnaby and Nanaimo on its Victoria–Port Angeles run. The MV Coho, built in 1959 and the inspiration for the design of BC Ferries' first nine ships, has been re-engined and had its life extended for at least another 20 years.

Black Ball claims she has never missed a sailing due to weather or mechanical reasons. Is BC Ferries capital rich and maintenance poor?