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Queen of Burnaby replacement gets cool reception

Chuck Childress

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.

BC Ferries' own stats show weather cancellations increasing from a yearly average of 11 for 2007-09 to 69 for 2010-12. A number of residents pointed out that many in the region feel that the amount of weather cancellations is already excessive, and that using an unproven open-deck design will lead to an even greater increase. Salt spray and passenger comfort while entering and exiting vehicles on an open-deck vessel versus a closed-deck was seen as a significant reason to avoid an open-deck design.

BC Ferries is planning to use the 125 vehicle *MV Island Sky* to cross Georgia Strait during scheduled dock closures at Powell River and Comox in early 2014 and it was suggested, at both meetings, that no decision about an open-deck vessel be made until after a real-world performance of the nearly identical *MV Island Sky* could be assessed.

Capacity

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? ☞