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BC Ferries Route N^o9 winter weekend service cuts avoided? - Patrick Brown

To reduce fuel costs, BC Ferries threatened weekend service cuts for Route N^o9, the *Queen of Nanaimo* route between Tsawwassen and the Gulf Islands. But Ferry Advisory Committees have suggested eliminating service on winter Wednesdays instead.

Route N^o9 is homeported at Long Harbour on Salt Spring. Currently, Friday night, Saturday morning, and Sunday night runs cross the Strait of Georgia twice—splitting ports of call—in order to provide enough weekend ‘lift-off’ to Galiano, Mayne, Pender, and Salt Spring Islands, and the Mainland connection to Saturna Island, via Route #5A.

BC Ferries had suggested that from mid-October to mid-May these three double runs be reduced to single runs between Tsawwassen and Salt Spring, calling at every Island enroute. This was the year-round pattern two decades ago, before an entirely new economy was built.

FACC: A Better Suggestion

The Ferry Advisory Committee Chairs (FACC) pointed out that this strategy would inevitably lead to overloads, loss of business, and economic depression. In addition, it would make travel between Saturna and Tsawwassen virtually impossible on winter weekends. The FACC suggested that an equivalent amount of fuel might be saved by cancelling Route N^o9 sailings altogether on winter Wednesdays, and leaving the weekend schedules unchanged. Instead of making changes to the schedule for the busiest part of the week (33 weekends), why not cancel sailings altogether for one day in the middle of the week (on nine winter Wednesdays)?

After some negotiation—and with the help of the Salt Spring Ferry Advisory Committee, Island Trustees and MLA Gary Holman—BC Ferries has agreed to consider the following for the winter schedule:

(1) Friday afternoon service from Tsawwassen to the Islands would be the same as the current Monday to Thursday service—one Friday PM sailing out of Tsawwassen. BC Ferries is also considering adjusting the Friday evening Route N^o5 service so it is the same as the rest of the week, providing the Saturna connections to the Route N^o9 service.

(2) Saturday AM and Sunday PM Route N^o9 service would

be unchanged from the present, maintaining the double runs from Tsawwassen.

(3) There would be no Route N^o9 sailings (morning or afternoon) on the following winter Wednesdays: in 2015, January 7, 14, 21, 28; February 4, 11, 18, 25, and March 4. For 2016, the Wednesdays with no Route N^o9 sailings would be January 6, 13, 20, 27; February 3, 10, 17, 24, and March 2. These are days when traffic is low, and potential travellers could arrange to transfer through Swartz Bay, or travel on another day.

Next Two Winters Only

These proposed changes are for the next two winters only, after which it is expected that the *Queen of Nanaimo* will be replaced by new 145-car ferries on Route N^o9. They will have greater capacity and flexibility, as well as faster loading and unloading, and will provide new opportunities for efficient scheduling.

BC Ferries has assured the FACC that the Wednesday cuts are not intended to be a precedent to more service cuts in the longer term. The savings expected would arise completely from reductions in fuel consumption; no reductions in labour costs are expected.

These strategies may be an example of what can be accomplished when BC Ferries listens to suggestions from the communities it serves. ☞

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