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Reprint from Volume 26 Number 20

October 16, 2014

Ferries' southern islands' cuts - Natalie Dunsmuir

Gulf Island communities will feel the strain of new ferry cuts this winter. Though BC Ferries uses phrases such as 'adjusting schedules' and 'implementing refinements', the severity of these cuts is not disguised. On nine Wednesdays between January 7 and March 4, 2015, all Tsawwassen-Gulf Island sailings will be cancelled. *Queen of Nanaimo* will not leave port on those days.

Friday scheduling will also change between Tsawwassen and the Southern Gulf Islands from mid-October to mid-May. There will only be one sailing in the evening, mirroring the Monday to Thursday schedule.

The last adjustment BC Ferries is putting in place is to change Friday's schedule between Swartz Bay-Southern Gulf Islands so that it will be the same as the Monday to Thursday schedule for the winter. Schedule changes have been updated on the BC Ferries website, but as yet no print booklets have been issued.

BC Ferry Services Inc says that it has spent months working with Southern Gulf Islands and Salt Spring Ferry Advisory Committees (FACs) attempting to find a scheduling solution that will meet the net cost savings target established by the Province while minimizing the impact of cuts on islanders. The idea of cutting Wednesdays was initiated by these FACs as an alternative to reducing sailings on weekends.

With the recent release of the socioeconomic study 'Boatswains to the Bollards', which examines BC Ferries' effect

on the economy and livelihood of British Columbia, dissatisfaction towards BC Ferries has increased. Rising fares and decreasing sailings have driven some people, such as Gabriola's Bridge Society, to search for ways around the multi-million dollar corporation, sparking debate between communities. While not all residents are eager to put their faith in bridges, many feel that something does need to change.

It can be said for BC Ferries that they did make an effort to reduce the inconvenience their schedule changes will inflict upon islanders and visitors; every action has unknown ripples, however. In this case, students who attend Saturna Ecological Education Center (SEEC), which runs from Sunday night to Wednesday afternoon, will have to find new ways of reaching their homes for the weekend.

'The SEEC Program already overcomes many challenges to offer a world-class educational program on relatively isolated Saturna Island, and now these cuts will add to the level of complexity involved,' says teacher and principal of the SEEC program, Steve Dunsmuir. 'Our students come from all over the province and Wednesdays are a prime time for them to travel home. Having to divert through Swartz Bay will add hours to their travel time, if they can even make the connection at all.'

BC Ferries' recent history is littered with sailing cuts and fare increases. As a result, ridership is now close to the same level as it was in 1991, despite population increases. ☞

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'This article was published (October 16, 2014) in 'Island Tides', an independent, regional newspaper distributing on the Canadian Gulf Islands, on Vancouver Island and, via the internet, worldwide.'

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