

# Reprint Island Tides

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Reprint from Volume 27 Number 17

September 3, 2015

## Ferry schedule shake-up sets off a tsunami of opposition

Christa Grace-Warrick

**S**alish Eagle and Salish Raven, two new intermediate-class ferries, are coming to the Southern Gulf Islands to replace the larger 54-year-old *Queen of Nanaimo* on Route N°9 within two years. At a series of meetings in late August, BC Ferries revealed that the switch has become more profound and complicated than islanders could possibly have imagined.

An idea has been evolving in BC Ferries' scheduling department to rethink not only Route N°9 Tsawwassen-Gulf Islands but also to combine the two Swartz Bay-Southern Gulf Islands routes (N°5 and N°5A) with it.

The southern Gulf Islands system is the most complicated in the entire BC Ferries service—combining all three routes into a scheduling equation is a monumental task.

Currently, Route N°9 Tsawwassen-Gulf Islands links the Mainland with Galiano, Mayne, Pender and Salt Spring. A branch line (part of Route N°5A) takes Route N°9 transfer passengers to Saturna down Navy Channel between Mayne and Pender.

Routes N°5 and N°5A take Galiano, Mayne, Pender, and Saturna Islanders to Swartz Bay, Vancouver Island.

Currently, vessels are ship-specific: *Queen of Nanaimo* on Route N°9 (extra weekend capacity to Salt Spring provided by *Bowen Queen* in July and August). *Queen of Cumberland* services Route N°5 and *Mayne Queen* services Route 5A. At the meetings, BC Ferries team made it clear that specific vessels had not been assigned to legs of the proposed combined schedule: ie the two routes are to be integrated to an extraordinary extent.

### Pairing Paradigm

Proposed schedules for the new combined routes have been worked on in a whole new way. The driving motive for the shake-up seems to be to see if a computer program can make the vessels always sail full, as a cost-cutting measure. (Ironically,

Route N°5 is actually currently a profitable route for BC Ferries).

The model is inspired by the Route N°9 'pairing' pattern—developed two decades ago for Fridays and Sundays to give high capacity 'lift-off' for weekenders from the Mainland. For example, instead of the usual 4-port trip, on Friday night the *Queen of Nanaimo* squeezes in two trips but serves only two islands on each run. When introduced, the system broke down a number of inter-island connections, but only for two half-days

out of the week and holiday Mondays.

The August meetings—to fulfill the required community consultation requirement—presented an every day 'pairing' model for all three routes. Southern Islanders greeted it with overwhelming opposition.

Extensive 'pairing' would result in the extinguishing of the current decades-long, unique pattern of having two intertwining elliptical routes; one

homeporting in Swartz Bay and the other on Salt Spring.

The 'circle' where they overlap provides an inter-island service with transfers at various points—mainly at Village Bay, Mayne Island with its two docks and many-laned loading area. Two-island pairing breaks existing business arrangements and services of all kinds, built-up over 50 years to fit in with the ferry schedule.

### Impacts

Over the last couple of weeks as islanders became aware of the impact the proposed schedule would have on their lives—alerted by their ferry committees—they swung into action; taking over the meetings and changing storyboard-and-chat presentations to more formal meetings where islanders could listen to each other and BC Ferries representatives could listen to them. Bigger halls were booked and all-time record turn-outs took place. On Saturna (pop. 350), the island most heavily impacted by the pairing scheme, 260 people crowded the Rec Centre. On Pender, over 500 people sat and stood inside and outside the



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'This article was published (September 3, 2015) 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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The gym at the Penders Island School as the ferry schedule meeting began. It was packed like sardines before long. Photo: Nicholas van Bakel

school gym, with the temperature inside climbing to 30°C.

Person after person told BC Ferries representatives how their livelihoods would be impacted (giving actual dollar figures), how businesses would be ruined and how services like homecare, blood-to-lab transfer services for medical centres, BC Hydro and recycling service contracts, fresh food transfers, and building material supplies transfers would all be destroyed. Ingenuity in building livelihoods, without even leaving the archipelago, would be wiped out.

For Saturna, a pairing with Galiano would destroy all its inter-island business connections, typically with Mayne and Pender. How was it, said one speaker, that a private corporation receiving government money could decide the fate of a community?

Then there were the needs of business and services to reach Vancouver Island for the services not available on each particular island. Saturna has no doctor or nurse and no suppliers for the grocery store and many other businesses. The smaller the island, the greater its need for swift trips to town, leaving plenty of time for the myriad of stops needed to keep islanders' businesses and lives running.

The 'pairings' chosen, based on only tiny differences in population, went completely against being able to accomplish this. Trip durations were greatly increased and in-town time reduced, which meant more trips or trucks and vans waiting for much later ferries with consequential cost increases and loss of productive time at the home business.

This would also work in reverse—contractors coming onto islands from Vancouver Island would have long trip durations and impossible turn-around times and hence all manner of services for residents would cost exponentially more, or in some cases, contractors would cease to come at all.

Repeatedly asked why no business survey or economic impact study has been conducted, BC Ferries had no answer.

## Population Skewing

The relative populations of islands were put into the computer model. Due to the final stop of Route N<sup>o</sup>9 at Long Harbour on Salt Spring, and despite the fact that Salt Spring has two other dedicated short ferry routes to Vancouver Island and easy ability to transfer to Route N<sup>o</sup>1 (Swartz Bay–Mainland) ferries at Swartz Bay, it was drawn into the new integrated service plan. However, its population of 10,000 overwhelms any numbers calculation against Southern Island populations—Saturna at 350, Galiano: 1,100, Mayne: 1,070 and Penders: 2,500.



Photo: Christa Grace-Warrick

**Southern Islands connectivity. The *Mayne Queen* (berth on the left) and *Queen of Nanaimo* (right, further out) sail into Village Bay, to Mayne Island's twin docks to perform a transfer of passengers and cars. In this case travellers coming from the Mainland transfer to Saturna. During 50 years, businesses and people going about their lives have forged connections around the ability to travel from island to island.**

Additionally, it appears that no consideration was given to the quantity of services available on Salt Spring itself, with its town-sized population.

## Did BC Ferries Hear?

Following the first impassioned meeting on Saturna, BC Ferries staff were clearly shaken to the point where they replied less and less in corporate-speak. By the third meeting, on Pender, they barely replied at all, listening mutely as speaker after speaker

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told them for the third time about the same impacts.

However, a BC Ferries spokesperson at the Pender meeting did acknowledge that they had 'made a mistake' in not considering vital inter-island connections for the core communities of the Southern Islands or the impacts that reduced service would have on businesses.

BC Ferries also acknowledges that the replacement vessel(s) for the *Queen of Nanaimo* do not inherently mean that the two services must be combined, nor that Route N<sup>o</sup> 5 and 5A cannot remain as now.

One thing is certain—having the presumption to present, as one speaker said, 'this trainwreck of a ferry schedule' without doing their homework, BC Ferries has lost a great deal of credibility and goodwill on the Southern Islands. Islanders are insulted and offended by BC Ferries' lack of understanding of the communities it was designed to service.

Apologies all round and back to the drawing board? ☞

*Ed's Note: Nicholas van Bakel and I are preparing a mini-doc of video shot at the ferry meetings. We will let you know when it is posted on IslandTidesTV.*