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New, new SGI ferry schedules; read and take the survey

Brian Hollingshead, Chair, SGIFAC

BC Ferries has now developed a new set of schedules in response to what they heard and read regarding the first version this summer. The new proposed schedules are online in the same location as a much improved on-line feedback survey at www.bcferrries.com. But you **only have till December 14 to do complete the survey!**

Your ferry advisory committee is charged with helping you understand what's happening with ferry service, as well as providing community-based advice to BC Ferries. To this end, we urge you to read this article, look at the schedules, take the survey, including giving comments. After the deadline, you are still free to write directly to BC Ferries about the proposed schedules or the survey—but don't delay.

Old Proposed Schedules

In July, BC Ferries presented a set of ferry schedules for the Southern Gulf Islands to come into effect in 2017 with the arrival of the new intermediate class ferries, replacing *Queen of Nanaimo*. Those schedules included fundamental changes to service to and from Tsawwassen (Route N^o9) and sailings to and from Swartz Bay (Routes N^o5 & 5A). Those schedules were found to be broadly unacceptable at a tumultuous series of August open houses. Hence these new proposals.

New Proposal A Good Start

The 'good' part is that the Swartz Bay schedule has largely been returned to its existing form, getting rid of the highly unpopular 'pairing' concept and restoring inter-island travel.

Winter Weekend Crunch

That said, at least one significant problem remains. Though there have been some improvements to the weekend service from Tsawwassen, it appears there will be some crunch points at preferred sailing times, especially on Fridays and Sundays.

BC Ferries seems optimistic that people will be content to move to less convenient sailing times when their preferred sailings are fully booked. They concluded from their first survey that, for customers, the 'most important aspect of ferry service is frequency of service'. Your ferry advisors contend that having adequate capacity available when needed/wanted beats 'frequency', particularly when 'frequency' includes sailings with little or no usefulness.

Though the new online survey is improved over the earlier one,

it still has, in our opinion, a major shortcoming. While it identifies sailing departure and arrival times, it provides no indication of the anticipated demand for those sailings. This is a critical factor for the weekend service to and from Tsawwassen.

For instance, the schedule for the off-peak season (mid-Oct to mid-May) shows a Friday sailing from Tsawwassen at 7:15pm for all islands including Salt Spring. There is an optional 3:40pm sailing for Galiano and Mayne. Most people would see a 7:15pm departure as excellent, and would rate it accordingly.

What they won't see is that the projected demand for busy Fridays (BC Ferries data) is for *224 cars departing through the afternoon and evening*, from Tsawwassen to the five islands. This means reservations for the first 140 or so cars on the evening ferry will be accepted. Occupants of the remaining 84 cars will have the option of going on the afternoon ferry (if they're going to Mayne or Galiano), going through-fare via Swartz Bay or going Saturday morning. Or staying home.

It's our sense that most people traveling to their island on Friday evenings don't have the option of travelling in the afternoon (jobs, school). Thus, there will be those who rated the Friday PM service as excellent, finding themselves disappointed when they're unable to get a reservation. While this service may have been manageable with the 190-car *Queen of Nanaimo*, we believe it will result in many cancelled weekend trips in the busier off-peak months (March to May).

While a Friday night through-fare may work (if not wonderfully) for Salt Spring, it becomes less and less viable the farther away from Swartz Bay the destination island is. Hopefully the current initiative to make the through-fare process more customer-friendly will make that option more attractive.

Improvement

Seen as a positive adjustment, this schedule recognizes that two-thirds of the Route N^o9 traffic is to and from the Southern Gulf Islands while the remaining third is to and from Salt Spring. The previously proposed schedule for shoulder and peak seasons included direct, non-stop service to Salt Spring in Friday evening prime time. This left the four Southern Gulf Islands competing for space on the other evening ferry. The revised schedule provides balanced use of both ferries—as BC Ferries committed in the very first stages of the two-ferry proposal. The new schedule still includes a direct non-stop peak season Sunday

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evening sailing from SSI to Tsawwassen, departing at 7:20pm, arriving in Tsawwassen at 8:43pm.

Not So Good

Meanwhile, the stressed SGI service results in Galiano requiring a sailing arriving in Tsawwassen at 11:22pm. It would seem to make sense for the SSI direct sailing to stop at Sturdies Bay enroute to Tsawwassen to accept a limited number of Galiano reservations, eliminating the need for the ultra-late sailing.

The schedule initially presented with the survey included Sunday evening service in the off-peak season as carrying traffic from all five islands to Tsawwassen on a single sailing. This wouldn't be possible even now with the larger *Queen of Nanaimo*. When we pointed this out to BC Ferries, they quickly modified the schedule and the survey to reflect service being balanced between all islands. Pender and Mayne traffic will be on a separate sailing (as presently).

Even still, we expect the smaller ferry will be unable to cope with the demand, resulting in people being referred to Sunday morning departures or travelling through-fare via Swartz Bay. It's our view that neither of these will be acceptable options for most people.

The remaining 'one significant problem', of which we are presently aware, is the late morning service from Saturna to Swartz Bay, and back on the afternoon sailing. The previous proposed schedule shortened turnaround time to non-viable. (This problem was highlighted at Saturna's August open house. It had already been identified at earlier advisory meetings was first fixed, and then reinstated.) This serious problem remains and requires resolution.

Above are the big items we found. As with any change, there are some minor wins and losses, some perhaps easily fixable. Some of the losses will be survivable, while others may prove untenable, once implemented.

The new survey results will be assessed in early January, and further adjustments may be possible after that. The schedule will be finalized in the spring of 2016 for implementation in the spring of 2017.

Now, it's time to pay attention; to get involved. BC Ferries is asking for our input. They can't be faulted if we don't provide it. The survey is there for all of us. ☞

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