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BC Ferries' new Southern Gulf Islands schedule - Brian Hollingshead

Well, the announcement is new. The schedules actually go into effect early next year when the two new 145-car ferries, the *Salish Raven* and the *Salish Eagle* come into service, replacing the venerable 190-car *Queen of Nanaimo*. On July 11, the full schedules will be available for viewing: www.bcferrries.com/about/publicconsultation2/sgi-consultation.html.

Despite having gotten off to a rocky start last summer, the schedules are generally an improvement over what we've had previously. BC Ferries listened to our communities, including the voices of the dedicated SGI representatives on the External Working Group. There are specific improvements, a few minor losses, a number of 'wait-and-see's and some changes that will be viewed positively by some and less so by others.

Improvements:

- having both vessels in service during the shoulder season (May and June, September until Thanksgiving) versus just having the *Queen of Nanaimo* previously will provide much needed greater weekend service for all islands;
- for Pender: resolution of the long-standing overload situation on the 11:45am sailing to Swartz Bay during the Fall-Winter-Spring schedule;
- for Pender: a direct (no transfer) Sunday night sailing to Tsawwassen in the off-peak season;
- for Mayne: a new direct sailing from Swartz Bay (10:10am in the off-peak season and 10:25am in the shoulder season);
- for Saturna: a long-sought 3:10pm departure from Swartz Bay, permitting a through-fare connection on the 1pm sailing from Tsawwassen, which cuts two hours off the trip, and more time in town for a vital mid-day turn-around;
- for Saturna: Friday afternoon access to Tsawwassen all year, new for Saturna while standard for the other islands; and
- for Galiano: provision of an earlier Friday afternoon option from Tsawwassen during the off-peak season.

Some minuses:

- for Pender: having to make two transfers (Village Bay and Sturdies Bay) to get to Tsawwassen on Friday nights in the off-peak season;
- for Saturna: loss of the two-hour-five-minute Sunday night trip during the off-peak season from Tsawwassen, replaced by a three-hour-55-minute trip via Swartz Bay;
- for Saturna: moving the first trip off the island from

6:25am to 6:15am (hard on anybody—it means 5:45am at the terminal for trips to Tsawwassen); and

- for Mayne: loss of the Sunday afternoon passenger-only sailing to Tsawwassen in the off-peak season, replaced by a single 7:05pm sailing.

The 'wait-and-see's:

- for all islands, the off-peak Friday afternoon sailing to Tsawwassen sees Pender, Mayne and Saturna traffic gathered up for transfer at Sturdies Bay en route to Tsawwassen. This is about 20 vehicles and 50 passengers, fairly steady all winter. Whether Sturdies Bay can handle this traffic efficiently remains to be seen.
- for all islands: the Friday afternoon schedule from Tsawwassen in the off-peak includes a 3:20pm sailing to Galiano and Salt Spring, followed by a 7:50pm milk run to all four islands and Salt Spring. It seems likely there will be overloads on that later sailing. Reservations are recommended.

Pluses and minuses:

These generally relate to earlier and later Sunday sailings to Tsawwassen in the off-peak season. Galiano: 7:45pm versus 5:05pm now. Saturna: 5:30pm versus 3:35pm now. Pender: 3:45pm versus 7:20pm now. Mayne: 7:05pm versus 8:05pm. Some people will appreciate earlier arrivals in Tsawwassen while others prefer more time on-island.

It should be noted that our much-prized inter-island connections, in jeopardy last summer, have now been retained.

BC Ferries has advised us that some aspects of the new schedule will need to be put into practice to see how well they actually work. If there are problems with them—overloads, on-time performance—they are prepared to reconsider those parts of the schedule. As well, they have prepared us to not expect perfect performance from these ferries the first day they go into service. There can be minor teething problems with any new ferries.

Likely the biggest thing we'll need to get used to will be driving down through the main deck to the lower deck. It works in Europe, so it's expected by BC Ferries to work here. We have advised BC Ferries that these ferries' success will depend on having adequate width of the opening in the main deck and a shallow enough angle on the ramps to the lower deck. They have assured us they've heard.

While not part of the new scheduling process, BC Ferries' improvement to the through-fare system is much-welcomed as it will reduce some of the sense of loss in those instances where

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direct service has been downgraded to a through-fare connection via Swartz Bay. As well, BC Ferries' commitment to promote the improved through-fare process has the potential to benefit island tourism by clearly presenting all the options available.

We look forward, optimistically, to the arrival of the new ships while, at the same time, we know we're going to miss some aspects of the *Queen of Nanaimo*. ☺