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Ferry advisory committees on the money - Gary Coons, MLA North Coast

People who live in British Columbia's coastal communities know that ferry service is not a luxury. It is a necessity, not unlike the highways that the inland citizens of this province take for granted. Our marine highways, like those on land, are paid for with our tax dollars.

Since BC Ferries became a private company, people who rely on ferry service to get to work and school, and to transport needed goods to their communities have seen their fares increase by almost 50%. Meanwhile, BC Ferries continues to take in soaring profits. It is difficult to figure out how this equation is in any way beneficial for British Columbians, other than those few who get to share in the profits of the BC Ferry Corporation.

The Ferries Advisory Council Chairs (FACC) recently put forth a series of urgent proposals to help mitigate the serious situation facing users of 22 ferries routes to coastal communities in BC. I fully support the Ferries Advisory Council Chairs. They had the best interests of the residents of the coast in mind when they identified several key issues of note to the government.

First of all, they indicated that unprecedented fare increases are harming coastal communities. Higher fares mean fewer tourists, more expensive goods, and an increased sense of isolation. These higher fares are threatening the long term viability of routes that many people depend on.

Current and future users, they point out, are being forced to pay for past neglect of the system. This isn't reasonable; nor is it realistic for the 22 small routes to move towards user-pay, when residents of the Mainland are not expected to bear the brunt of

their transportation infrastructure costs on a per use basis.

The FACC made some very astute recommendations to the government based on these key issues. I've urged the Hon Kevin Falcon, Minister of Transportation to take their advice seriously.

They suggested that the government along with the FACC and BC Ferries develop a 'ferry dependent communities strategy' to ensure the long-term viability of routes to remote communities.

In conjunction with its strategy, the FACC has advised that the government review their service fee contributions for these 22 routes, with respect to the rising costs of fuel and the backlog of equipment upgrades needed to service these routes well. They also hope the government will increase its funding in respect to the rate of inflation.

The FACC believes that the government contract for performance term two needs to include flexibility to accommodate service level adjustments for more efficient and effective service to communities serviced by ferries. As well, they insist it is necessary to include a consultation protocol in the contract. That consultation protocol should include all the parties involved in ferry service: the Transportation Minister, BC Ferries, the BC Ferry Commissioner and the FACC.

The Ferries Advisory Council Chairs is comprised of twelve committees, and those who sit on the committees are representatives chosen by local governments. As such, this advisory body understands the realities of people who live on the coast and depend on ferries for their livelihoods. Kevin Falcon would be wise to listen to their insight and experience.



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