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'Let's rock the boat,' says protest organizer

Following the March 8, Gabriola-based ferry fare-hike demonstration in Nanaimo, a ship-board demonstration took place on March 27. Seventy protesters embarked on the noon ferry bound for Denman Island from Buckley Bay on Vancouver Island. The Denman and Hornby 'footsies' were protesting disproportionate ferry fare increases on minor routes connecting Gulf Island communities to the Mainland or Vancouver Island.

Organizer Michelle Easterly, who runs an accommodation for visitors to Hornby Island, said protesters want, 'to get back our 'Coastal Highway 22'. Hornby residents are particularly hard-hit as they must take two ferry rides home; first from Buckley Bay to Denman, drive across the Island and then take a second sailing to Hornby.

Marine Highways

'Fares are just skyrocketing. The minor routes are feeling a huge crunch,' says NDP Opposition Critic for Ferries and Ports, Gary Coons. 'It's a marine highway,' Coons insists. 'They have to treat it the same way as other transportation links.'

Islanders say they want their marine highway back. 'This would see operating costs once again shared among all British Columbians, just as the costs of improvements on other provincial highways are shared. After all, we Islanders subsidize snowplowing, bridges and other highway services in the Interior,' Easterly points out.

Until 1971, Albert J Savoie and his brother operated a privately-run service to Hornby Island, at which time Ministry

of Highways took over many northern island ferry services as part of the highway system, which it ran until handing over to BC Ferries in 1985. (More information on the fascinating history of ferry service in BC can be found in Frank Clapp's book *Ministry of Transportation and Highways: Inland and Coastal Ferries*.)

Past Neglect Equals High Cost Now

Hornby Islands Trustee, Tony Law points out, 'One reason for high ferry costs now is that the province did not adequately support the system and present users are having to pay for past neglect when the government failed to maintain or replace aging vessels and terminals.'

After serving on the Ferry Advisory Committee for the past five years, Law decries what he terms a 'political football game ... which just detracts from the main message of funding ferries as part of provincial transportation infrastructure, whoever manages them.'

Easterly also faults, 'the bizarre belief that ever-increasing ferry fees will generate higher income' despite a 1997 BC Ferries study which found that, on routes serving coastal and island communities, each 10% rise in fares decreases the number of users by another 3%.

'In this downward spiral, the fare hikes also saw BC Ferries lose almost \$8 million in the last quarter—nearly five-times more than during the same period the previous year,' Easterly concludes. *See also related story on page 6.*

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