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Unprecedented 'leave-behinds' on Galiano–Tsawwassen ferry

Patrick Brown

On Saturday evening, July 5, between 30 and 50 travellers were left behind at Sturdies Bay, Galiano Island, as the *Queen of Nanaimo* departed for Tsawwassen. They blocked the ramp and asked the ship's Captain to speak to them. He came down to the car deck and did so; and then he called Galiano's RCMP officer to disperse them. They were angry, they were not taking no for an answer—they had good reason to be angry.

Overloads are not unusual in the BC Ferries system, but this was different. Many of the crowd had reservations. The car deck of the *Queen of Nanaimo* could be seen to have room for the reserved vehicles. And there would be no more ferries to the mainland that night; it would be possible to take a later ferry to Swartz Bay, but that was clearly not where anyone wanted to go; they would be marooned on Vancouver Island till morning, with accommodation unlikely and expensive. One BC Ferries employee from Galiano volunteered to join the ship, but two personnel would have been needed to bump the license-level up to permit another 166 passengers.

Why?

How could this have happened? How can it be prevented in the future?

To minimize costs, BC Ferries dispatches each vessel with the minimum allowable number of crew. This number, generally more than would actually be necessary to sail, dock, and staff the ship, is set by Transport Canada depending on the number of passengers which would have to be evacuated from the ship in case of a collision, fire, or similar disaster.

Ferry riders are all familiar with the announcement that says, 'our crew are Transport Canada certified. In the event ... they will tell you exactly what to do' (with lots of emphasis on 'exactly').

There have to be enough of them to show you exactly how those evacuation chutes work. This is the same approach that Transport Canada takes with aircraft; the number of stewardesses depends on the number of passengers aboard if it crashes, not on how many it takes to fly the plane.

How Many Seamen Does It Take To...

Each ship can be operated under one of several Transport Canada licenses, and the license used for each shift is chosen depending on the maximum number of passengers expected on board at any point during the shift. The licenses for the *Queen of Nanaimo* are, currently:

- A License, Maximum 977 passengers, 27 crew
- B License, Maximum 750 passengers, 22 crew
- C License, Maximum 584 passengers, 20 crew
- D License, Maximum 450 passengers, 19 crew
- E License, Ship movement only, 0 passengers, 11 crew

Estimating How Many Passengers

For the main route ferries travelling between, say, Swartz Bay and Tsawwassen, estimating the number of passengers expected is relatively simple: BC Ferries has comprehensive passenger statistics, going back years, on how many passengers travelled on each trip on any given day. To check on their estimate, all they have to do is look out the window to ascertain how many cars are in the terminal, and how many walk-ons are in the waiting room.

The same approach to the calculation can be used for Route N^o9 as the *Queen of Nanaimo* prepares to leave Tsawwassen for the Gulf Islands. But coming the other way Route N^o9 is more complicated; harder to estimate than any other route that BC Ferries operates.

The *Queen of Nanaimo* leaves from Long Harbour on Salt Spring Island and at about forty minute intervals calls at Otter Bay on Pender Island, Village Bay on Mayne Island (where she also picking up Saturna transfers), and finally Sturdies Bay on Galiano Island, before setting out across the Strait of Georgia to Tsawwassen. The *Queen of Nanaimo* is home-ported on Salt Spring Island and all the crew come from there. They must be notified at least a couple of hours before the new shift starts, either in the morning or in the middle of the afternoon.

So the Long Harbour Marine Superintendent must estimate, by early in the afternoon, the maximum number of passengers that may be on the boat on that evening's trip. He has his historical records, of course, but the only information he

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has on that particular afternoon's traffic is the number of car-and-driver reservations to Tsawwassen that have been made up to that point in the afternoon from Long Harbour, Otter Bay, Village Bay, Lyall Harbour and Sturdies Bay.

In some cases this is several hours before the ferry calls at these terminals. He does not know how many unreserved vehicles there might be, or, how many passengers there might be in each the vehicles, or how many walk-on passengers (footsies) there will be. He will estimate all these figures, add whatever fudge factor he is comfortable with, and use the total to decide what license the *Queen of Nanaimo* will sail under and how many crew to call in for that shift.

People Capacity Takes Precedence Over Cars Space

Most of the time, he will be right. On the evening of July 5, he wasn't. As a result, when the *Queen of Nanaimo* reached Sturdies Bay, she already had on board the maximum number of passengers (584 for a C-license), even though she had room on the car deck for the vehicles that had reservations from Galiano to Tsawwassen (she has a vehicle capacity of 192).

Why did this happen? Foot passenger or extra car passengers are exempted from reservations and terminals may sell them tickets as they arrive at the tickets booth. With three ports before Galiano this may result in the passenger quota (in cars or on foot) being almost filled before arriving on Galiano. It appeared that a large number of extra passengers had boarded the ship at the previous three terminals, and by the time they were aboard, it was too late to call out extra crew, particularly since the numbers would have gone over the top after the vessel left Salt Spring where the crew live.

Weddings, and Higher Fares

The company's records showed that the Saturday evening boat from the Islands to Tsawwassen in the summertime does not usually carry a large number of passengers. In retrospect, BC Ferries noted that three weddings had been held on the Islands that Saturday afternoon, and cars crammed with wedding-goers may have accounted for many of the extra passengers. Since there is no reservation system for passengers, the company could not have known that there were more than usual on July 5.

BC Ferries says that it tries to stay aware of any Island event that may lead to a passenger overload, it has even put on special ferries for the Saturna Lamb BBQ. BC Ferries ask that that organizers of events (including weddings) that could result in an extra crowd should advise the Long Harbour Marine Superintendent ahead of time, at 250-537-1478.

Interestingly, another factor in the passenger overload may be the steep rise in ferry fares; it is possible that more people are deciding to come on foot instead of bringing their cars. A factor not present in BC Ferries historical calculations.

Islands' ground crew have made the suggestion that Route

N^o9 must become a reservation route only, including all passengers. Until that happens, those on the ground think that it is a false economy, and very bad publicity for Islands' businesses, to risk the lowest license possible on summer weekends. ☺

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