

Reprint Island Tides

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What's up? Ferry fares, of course

BC Ferries Services Inc have announced 'annual' fare increases on all routes except north coast fares, which were last adjusted in October. The increases, effective April 1, will be about 3.8% on the main routes, and range from 5.7%–6.25% on Gulf Island routes.

Typical return fares, for car and driver are: Tsawwassen–Swartz Bay: now \$117, will be \$121.50; Tsawwassen–Southern Gulf Islands: 'Regular' season was \$108.30, will be \$114.50, 'Off Peak' season: now \$90.30, will be \$95.45 (note that the SGI 'peak' season has been renamed the 'regular' season, and the 'regular' season has been renamed the 'off peak' season); Swartz Bay–Southern Gulf Islands: now \$40.80, will be \$43.35; Horseshoe Bay–Langdale: now \$51.75, will be \$56.05; Campbell River–Quadra Island: now \$26.40, will be \$27.90.

Discounts are available on many routes to travelers using BC Ferries' 'Experience card', which requires payment in advance.

Astronomical Rises

The fare index, calculated by the Commission on the basis of price caps, shows that fare levels on the main routes as of April 1, 2010 will be 142% of the April 1, 2003 levels (the point at which BC Ferries was 'privatized').

Fare levels on minor routes will be 161% of 2003 levels, and on the Horseshoe Bay–Langdale route, 160%. These figures include fuel surcharges and rebates.

Fare levels continue to rise while the provincial contribution to the ferries has remained almost static since 2003.

Regular travelers will remember that during December 2008 and January 2009, the provincial government provided an additional subsidy which temporarily reduced fares to 2003 levels. No such subsidy was made available this year. Likely the occasion of the Winter Olympics was a factor.

Ferry Advisory Committee Concerns

Following last year's report by the Comptroller General on the ferry service, the Ferry Advisory Committee Chairs (FACC), representing ferry-users on twelve Islands, wrote to Shirley Bond, the provincial Minister of Transportation, emphasizing a finding of the Comptroller-General's report that the *Coastal Ferries Act* 'contains no articulation of the public service mandate of the system.'

The FACC emphasized the need to amend the *Act* to 'expand the role of the BC Ferry Commission, particularly with respect to protecting the interests of ferry-users'. At present, the focus of the Commission is entirely on ensuring the financial health of BC Ferries Services Inc, so that it can borrow money for capital and operating purposes without impinging on the Province's credit (at least theoretically).

The Comptroller General had also recommended that the *Act* require public consultation before changing service levels. The FACC supports this recommendation.

The FACC noted that the financial sustainability of the major routes has been accomplished through eliminating any cross-subsidization of other routes from major route revenues, and that the Northern Routes are now being financed through a separate 'northern strategy', since the funding arrangements under the *Act* could not support this part of the ferry system.

'It is now time,' said the FACC, 'to address the sustainability of all the non-major routes....'

Islands Trust Concerns

The Islands Trust supported the recommendations of the FACC in a February 9 letter to Premier Campbell and Minister Bond. In particular, the Trust seeks 'reassurances' that the IslandsTrust, the communities it represents, and the FACC will be consulted in the course of any ferry decisions made by the government.

'Our communities are struggling to remain diverse and to thrive in the face of pressures created by reduced ferry services and ever-increasing ferry fares. Our success in promoting sustainable communities depends on an affordable, reliable and responsive ferry system.'

The Islands Trust makes the point that 'people of differing age groups and income levels should continue to have the opportunity to reside in Island communities', and that economic security is an important element in ensuring that opportunity, along with education, social support systems, a healthy environment, affordable food and housing, and transportation. The implication is that reductions in service and continuing increases in ferry fares threaten all these factors, and so discriminate against Island residents and their communities.

The Trust also supports public involvement in decisions that affect island communities. The letter refers the Premier and

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Minister Bond to an FACC discussion paper, 'Towards a Minor Routes Strategy for Coastal Ferry Service 2008'. The letter also records that both the Association of Vancouver Island Coastal Communities and the Union of British Columbia Municipalities have supported the FACC in their recommendations. ✍

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