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Gabriola says no to bridge

A survey conducted by the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Vancouver Island (formerly Malaspina College) has confirmed that two-thirds of Gabriola residents do not want a bridge to the Island.

The suggestion of a bridge had come up some time ago during discussions the Gabriola Ferries Advisory Committee had with BC Ferries. As a result, BC Ferries contributed \$5,000 to cover the publication costs of a survey.

Questionnaires were sent to a random sample of 548 Gabriola households, of which 292 responded; certainly enough to constitute a valid representation of Gabriola residents.

The survey asked how often Gabriolans rode the ferry and why: nearly half said 'once a week' and less than 10% appeared to be daily commuters (although nearly a third said they took the ferry for work). Most trips were for shopping or for medical reasons; only 5.5% traveled to school. Two-thirds preferred to take their car (or truck); very few used bicycles or motorcycles.

Fares 'Not Reasonable'

Nearly two-thirds of ferry users felt the increasing price of ferry fares was leading them to ride the ferry less; the survey designers felt that this was interesting considering that many users did not ride the ferry much in the first place. Nearly half of the respondents felt moved to comment specifically on high fares.

But a question as to whether ferry fares were 'beyond their means' was not answered by many respondents, leading to no conclusion on this point. However, two-thirds of Gabriolans said that they felt that the ferries were part of the highway system, and should be free or at least deserving of increased subsidy.

Transportation Options

The original purpose of the survey was to explore transportation options, and the most popular suggestion was that the ferry schedule should be better integrated with the regional transit system, favoured by nearly two-thirds of respondents. Nearly half would welcome a larger ferry but 38% thought that no change in the ferry service was required.

What they didn't like was a suggestion that some crossings could be 'passenger only', the idea of a smaller ferry or less trips per day, and, in particular, any option involving Duke Point.

(Duke Point is closer to Gabriola than the current downtown Nanaimo terminal, but it is much further by road from downtown.)

No Bridge

The reason the survey was supported by BC Ferries is because the privatized corporation wished to find out whether a bridge—even a toll bridge—would enable the ferry service to be abandoned. But 2/3 of Gabriolans made it clear that they didn't want any further investigations into a bridge option. 1/3 were willing to support further investigations, but did not necessarily support the bridge option.

A major factor for those opposing a bridge was the cultural impact on the community—obviously, an island with a bridge is no longer an island. Also, a bridge would probably leave users on Duke Point, far from downtown and impractical for pedestrians.

The survey designers concluded that many people live on Gabriola because it is an island, and 'that means accepting the challenges that go along with the benefits'.

'As a lifestyle choice, depending on the ferries is an acceptable option to most.' But respondents felt that fare increases 'had escalated beyond a reasonable level.'

The survey was designed and carried out by volunteer faculty members from the Department of Geography (Pam Shaw), and the Department of Sociology (Linda Derksen, Jerry Hinbest) with co-ordination by recent graduate Katelin Bowes, and additional help by student Eric Ross. ✍

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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada. Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com. Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>