



Gabriola Island Chamber of Commerce/Visitor Centre
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DATE: November 28, 2013
(sent via e-mail)

Position Statement

RE: BC Coastal Ferries Community Engagement Gabriola – Proposed Changes

On behalf of our 120 member businesses and our community, the Board of Directors of the Gabriola Island Chamber of Commerce, requests that this document be considered by the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MOTI), BC Ferries (BCF), and our local government representatives, as they plan for the long-term sustainability of the coastal ferry network.

This Position Statement document is divided into three sections:

- 1) Economic Values and Community Importance;**
- 2) Compromises for Achieving Budget Reductions;**
- 3) Conclusion.**

1) Economic Values and Community Importance

The Gabriola Island Chamber of Commerce is deeply concerned about the impact the proposed 14% sailing cuts will have on the socio-economic health of our community.

It has been well-documented by the provincial government and BCF that increasing fares have negatively impacted ferry passenger volumes and revenue. We believe that continued fare increases combined with the proposed service cuts, will relegate our island economy to permanent decline, with the immediate impact of these proposed service cuts resulting in a dismal business year like we had in the 2009-10 economic downturn.

We see that no socio-economic study was done to determine the impact of these schedule changes for Gabriola and other coastal communities, although to our understanding the provincial government vowed to protect the needs of these communities when the Coastal Ferry Act was enacted in 2003.

Based on our experience and member input, we highlight a few of these impacts anecdotally in the absence of government research:

- One of the most difficult challenges we face as a community is to maintain demographic diversity and it's critical for a healthy community's social fabric and sustainable economy - both from a consumer and workforce perspective. Feedback we have received from our member businesses in retail, restaurants and other amenities, indicates the proposed service cuts will greatly impact many young families with children, students, shift workers and lower-income wage earners as they do not have the flexibility with

their employment/education/extra-curricular activities to make the proposed 9:25 pm final sailing. The reality is many are telling us they will be forced to move off-island, and our estimate is between 200-300 full-time residents will be lost from our current population of 4,200 (2011 federal census).

- There are financial impacts for Nanaimo from these service cuts as well. It will be impossible for Gabriolans to attend shows at the Port Theatre or movies unless they have a place to stay overnight in Nanaimo. Also, there are young Nanaimo workers (e.g. culinary students from VIU) that work on Gabriola in the restaurant business and depend on later sailings to return home. These entertainment and employment options will be lost with the cuts of later sailings, to the detriment of both communities.
- As a renowned tourism destination, as well as home to several hundred part-time weekend and more than 1,000 summer residents, Gabriola's merchants are economically dependent on tourism to provide the extra cash flow that maintains the full-range of retail services and employment at their businesses in the low tourist season. Late-evening sailings on Thursdays and Fridays are vital, and tracked by one hospitality business on Gabriola - that regularly sees last-sailing visitors arrive here for weekend getaways from their big city lives. Without that late service, those "stealing away" for the weekend will choose another destination (non-ferry dependent) to be able to get as much precious time away as possible. Gabriola will definitely lose those dollars spent in the stores, services, restaurants and accommodation providers.
- There are long-standing, marquee events on Gabriola such as the Lions' Concert on the Green and Gabriola Theatre Festival that attract several thousand day-trip visitors yearly, presenting significant economic benefits for island businesses. These events occur in evenings and end at times when these off-islanders would not be able to return to Vancouver Island. With the proposed sailing cuts, this business will be lost.

2) Compromises for Achieving Budget Reductions

Even though Gabriola has the highest usage rate among all the minor BCF routes, we can appreciate the pressure for budget reductions in business. But the search for easy-answer efficiencies by all-days, year-round service cuts, however, seems crude and poorly researched.

We believe that BCF has the same access to talent and resources that other modern businesses do to track and analyze the numbers more finely. We believe you can achieve close to or all of your reduction targets with far less socio-economic damage to Gabriola. So we, as one of your valued clients, ask you to sharpen your pencil and work a little harder at coming up with a better solution.

A few top of mind suggestions:

- i. **Manage each sailing better, especially in the summer months** - Service to Gabriola has no advance reservation system and none is planned to our knowledge. Ferry sailing overloads dominate the summer months, and combined with the continued fare increases it has created a dire, and statistically validated situation with reduced tourist traffic to the island. People will not come here if the overloads become unbearable. It is an economic hardship for the island that has BCF as the sole gatekeeper.

- ii. **Consider continuing to achieve significant savings through the following amendment to your proposed schedule** – eliminate one early afternoon sailing daily (shift change) and add back the last evening sailing daily (current schedule).
- iii. **If cuts go as planned without regard for Gabriola's service needs, then MOTI and BCF need to allow for other ferry service providers in Descanso Bay.** To that end, our local governments will be asked to initiate the process with the Gabriola electorate for requesting amendment of the "RDN's Descanso Wharf Service Bylaw No. 1357". The objective would be to allow for additional, but restricted use of chartered and licensed tourism or excursion service (water taxi) providers to access this publicly-funded dock for passenger embarkation of tourists and residents to/from Gabriola Island.

The Chamber has gone on record with both local governments and MOTI that Gabriola lacks a Plan B and remains socio-economically at the mercy of BCF management and the 50 year lease of the terminal from MOTI. We fault the local governments for this lack of foresight. For several decades in the 20th Century, there was a public dock alongside the BC Ferries dock in Descanso Bay. We believe that battles against fare increases and service cuts will never cease, so a viable option could simply be to look beyond BCF for additional ferry service options. The idea of minor routes delegated to incorporated, non-profit service co-ops and run independently has also been conjectured.

3) Conclusion

In the final analysis, we believe it is time for the BC Government to finally acknowledge that coastal ferries are an extension of the highway system and to support them in a manner that is equitable to all British Columbians. The interior ferries are treated that way, but not the coastal ferries. People in northern BC get a break on fuel taxes because of the distances in their communities, but coastal communities get a financial chokehold instead.

Over the past 20+ years, BCF services have been eroded through nothing else but bad policymaking and a lack of accountability to the ferry dependent public. Ultimately, this is a political problem and it needs a political solution from the Government of BC by: a) restoring more of the tax support (i.e., the percentage of subsidy) of the ferry system as for any other highway infrastructure; and b) to work with Transport Canada and all other involved groups to review and revamp requirements, such as the federal crewing regulations, with a focus on improving the efficiency of BC Ferries and therefore upholding the promise and responsibility to protect the needs of our island communities.

Yours sincerely,



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