

Prepared for BC Ferry Commissioner, September 28, 2011 Gabriola Public Meeting

Over the approximately 2 years I have sat on the Gabriola Ferry Advisory Committee I have always been struck by the complexity of the management structure of what is a simple one ship commuter run between two fixed points. I recall many instances when the simplest of situations have become complex discussions. For example the time that the management-- which is not based on Gabriola or in Nanaimo-- decided they would implement a new loading and off-loading strategy. This strategy would call for foot passengers to be held back when the ferry docked in Nanaimo so that the vehicles could be off loaded first. I believe it had something to do with a safety concern ie foot passengers would be driven over by the cars. And by the way this had never been a problem except in the minds of the non-resident management teams. It was pointed out that there was no way that the walk on passengers were going to literally sit still in the lounges while they missed their buses and /or risked being late for work or school. Furthermore the crews on board made it very clear there was no way they were going to police such a plan. So the plan was dropped.

Another example of this inefficient management model came to the surface when the Quinsam returned from its recent \$20m refit. To accommodate increased washroom space and life jacket storage the actual number of seats available for passengers to use was reduced. Prior to the refit, on what is referred to as the school sailings which are obviously the commuter runs as well, most lounges were already over-crowded with students sitting on the floor and wherever space could be found. On the refitted Quinsam the seating is less than it had been and unlike the previous seats the new ones had arm rests which restricted the number of people who could sit in the benches. Prior to the refit people if they chose could sit three a side. We requested that a certain number of these arm rests be removed allowing both students and adults to squeeze 3 people where only 2 could presently sit. It was a simple remedy requiring one worker with a single screw driver to remove 2 screws for each armrest. The request was made I believe at 3 separate FAC meetings. However the management responsible who I only ever saw on those sailings once because they are based in Saltspring, simply came up with one excuse after another for why this could and should not be done. From "people would be lounging on the seats and taking away seating" to "we have no responsibility to provide seating for all the passengers." They then simply said they had determined it was not a problem and would do nothing. As a result today there are students with no places to sit as there are adults who stand on their way to work in the morning. Probably minor issues in the scheme of things but totally unnecessary.

At a FAC meeting in the last year I recall a member of the public asking the BCF executives in attendance why there was no water fountain available any longer on the refitted Quinsam. The answer was rather interesting. It would seem that BCF has entered into an agreement with Coca Cola to sell exclusively their beverages and of course that includes bottled water. So it would be a breach of that agreement to therefore make water available thru a BCF supplied water fountain. Now I would suggest that this agreement was not entered into because of Gabriola ferry run but rather the runs of the major routes but we in the minor routes have lost another albeit simple amenity from our basic commuter service with the justification that the BCF has benefitted from the added revenue. Revenue of which the bulk is used to fund the major routes. And by the way I have never been denied a free glass of water, mind you in a Coca Cola cup, when I have travelled on the ferry to Horseshoe Bay.

Over the term of this FAC we have made a strong case for BCF to visit the use of the seniors' discount by shifting it to less travelled days and less travelled sailings. Our attempts to get this on to the table have been rebuffed each time by BCF. The reason given has been simple. This is a provincial program

and would need to be implemented on a system wide basis not to mention the fact that BCF gets paid a full adult fare each time a senior uses their CARE card to obtain a discount. Therefore what incentive is there for BCF to pursue a change that may result in a better level of service to its user base but would have little or no effect to its bottom line.

Recently as you are aware we lost the use of the Nanaimo Gabriola terminal for a number of weeks due to an accident. Although BCF did respond in a fast and reasonably efficient manner to replace the service with both sailings for vehicles to Duke Point and a passenger only service into the Boat Basin in the Nanaimo Harbour, it was interesting that foot passengers had to walk first to the terminal to purchase their tickets and then another couple of blocks to where the actual vessel departed. This created a real problem for the elderly, the handicapped and people with young kids. The problem was that the complex POS that BCF uses which is obviously required for the Major Routes could not be duplicated very easily at the dock where the foot passenger ferry was departing. Interestingly enough if they were still using the old system of commuter tickets that BCF discontinued because it was inconsistent with the needs of the larger system this would not have been a problem.

During these last couple of years it became clear to me that the Gabriola ferry is just two small a cog in the wheels of BC Ferries. Its management structure is totally geared to both the building and running of what is called the major routes. Routes such as ours, Quadra, Hornby, Cortes, Thetis become either lost in or trampled by the weight of the management structure to maintain the Class C Ferries and the Major routes.

The Coastal Ferries Act of 2003 is proving itself a dismal failure at least in the eyes of the ferry traveling public on the minor routes, who have seen dramatically increased fares, lost business income in the form of tourist travel, and money spent needlessly on waiting rooms that were never an issue for the traveling public. As an aside that new waiting room at the Gabriola ferry terminal has a handicapped washroom. It has a level entrance so that wheelchairs can easily make entrance. All of which is wonderful however it has a door that requires a fully abled bodied individual to open due to the fact it has no automatic door opener. Certainly not an issue one would see in Departure Bay.

Prior to the Coastal Ferries Act I participated in a special commitment struck by the old BC Ferries Corporation to revamp the Gabriola Schedule which had not worked for years. That committee was headed by the run's Master and staffed with representatives from the local community. Out of that committee came a new schedule that worked for many years. It did not require multi level approval of various department heads from a Corporation far far away. The process was cheap and effective. Something that cannot be said today. We now have a revised schedule which is more costly for the run although no one has told us how much. This revised schedule was a result of a mistake made somewhere within the BCF management structure which saw a refitted vessel return at a lesser speed than when it left for its refit.

I know there are many other issues that face anyone operating a transportation system today. The world has become a much more complex and expensive place. We are told time and time again to think locally and act globally. If one was to apply this expression or its intent to the operation of the Gabriola ferry I think one would be looking for a system that would allow for local on the ground control of its daily operations. Yes the issues of fuel, capital expense etc need to be approached from a broader perspective but not at the expense of the primary function. The current structure of BCF may be very well suited to running the major routes along with the significant capital investments that such routes

require but by nature that structure is and always will be too far removed from the everyday operation of a small 80 vehicle ferry making a 20 minute crossing 18 hours a day 7 days a week.

I feel very strongly that if Gabriola is going to be able to have a sustainable ferry operation into the future that future must be separate from the major routes. Whether it is retuning this run to Highways, establishing a separate entity to operate the minor routes or turning it over to the individual stake holders ie the tax payers of Gabriola, I do not know the answer. But I do know the answer is not The Coastal Ferries Act.

John Woods

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