

Perspective on BC Ferries

September 22, 2011

I am completing the second of two terms with the Gabriola Ferry Advisory Committee (FAC) representing the public of Gabriola Island to BC Ferries.

The past two terms have, in my opinion, not been beneficial to residents of this Island.

Issues:

BC Ferries, in my opinion, pays lip service to the broader concerns of the public by appeasing them with small items agreed upon at FAC/BCF Committee meetings.

The larger issue is Ferry fares increasing far quicker than inflation or plausible explanation. The cost of BC Ferries always seems to get buried in accounting explanations that few people understand, or the subject is set aside for further investigation after statements to the effect that the BCF Management is not responsible because fares are set by committees for 4 year periods.

The public simply observes the appearances of waste and squandering of money by BCF, while the unsustainable cost of ferry fares keeps increasing. The issues surrounding fare increases falls on deaf ears and blame for the fare increases passed on to others that you do not get to talk to.

Issues that are difficult to explain to the public are as follows:

- BC Ferries continues to negatively affect the residents of the Gulf Island and Vancouver Island with ever increasing ferry fares, while the management of BCF reward themselves with paid box office seating entitlement to sports events.
- The public does not understand why BCF pay for and sponsor advertising signs on Hockey arenas when the Corporation is a monopoly.
- BCF Ferry staff, that I have interviewed, appears to be very happy with their wages and benefits. Conversely, the staff complain about management in Victoria being 'top heavy' and not able to easily make decisions without numerous management involved causing delay and increased expense.
- Why is fuel surcharges immediately downloaded onto the public when energy prices rise. It appears to the average user that fuel surcharges are not quickly removed when energy prices drop? People I have talked to understand contract obligations for fuel, but they do not understand why the 'contract fuel' becomes a convenient tool to explain the fare increase.

- BCF accounting is almost impossible to understand never mind explain how smaller routes are consistently blamed for losing money.
- BCF appears to many in the public eye, as being expensive and inefficient, with excessive and overly paid management, senior officers, and executives.
- BCF does not appear to have any clear focus on the ability of Gulf Island residents to pay ever increasing fares. A CTV announcer recently stated 'well they choose to live there'. The attitude is self explanatory, and probably widespread.
- The high cost of ferry fares is affecting families and young people moving to the Gulf Islands. Even with the Experience card, a family of 4 working in Nanaimo, going to University, and needing a vehicle will pay over \$40.00 per day just to commute. That is about \$800.00 per month.
- The reverse travel is also affected by high fares. Family travel fewer trips to Gabriola Island especially when also traveling the big ferries to the mainland.
- The cost of goods and services continue to go up because of ferry fare costs. Retailers and Grocers simply raise prices to offset their costs for transportation.
- BCF will likely acknowledge that ridership on the ferries is dropping. The CEO recently blamed the economy for fewer travelers. He stated fewer Americans were riding the ferries in the summer due to their economy and the dollar exchange rate. His statement was completely out of context with the next day statements from business in Whistler BC, who stated American tourism was up 11 % over a year ago. Maybe the BCF management might want to acknowledge more visitors not traveling on the ferries because of unaffordable ferry fares. Keep in mind that a family traveling to Vancouver Island will pay out about \$200.00 for a round trip. Then add in another approximately \$40.00 to travel to a Gulf Island.
- It appears that senior executives and management of BCF do not realize how expensive ferry travel is when they earn hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, and they do not pay for ferry use at all as part of their benefits. What do they care what ferry fares are since the staff travel free.
- BC Ferries needs to be restructured, reallocated to another department, privatized or something to offset ever increasing and difficult to pay ferry fares for the majority of people living on Islands, including Vancouver Island.
- It is very likely that BCF and ferry fares will be an election issue for the Premier to deal with. I for one will work to ensure that happens.

Summary:

BCF and the Government need to consider separating the large ferry routes from the small routes. Ask the Highways Department, BC Transit, Regional District or others operate the small ferry routes individually within specific local regions or Provincially through a more cost effective and efficient department, than the expensive overstaffed monolithic BC Ferry system that has developed over the past decade.

I also believe that the Gabriola ferry route is not as uneconomic as BC Ferries claim. It has not been easy to understand how the total cost of BC Ferry management/administration in Victoria is somehow proportioned to the Gabriola to Nanaimo ferry and all the other Gulf Island routes.

Gulf Islands are increasingly affected by high ferry fares and on-going decisions made in Victoria that prove to be expensive and inefficient. For example BC Ferries did not ask local residents, or the FAC for input as to design, cost, or even the look of the new waiting room building. What did we get? ...an expensive building with little more space than the old building, and has a handicap wash room with no button on the outside of the door for a handicap person to access the washroom.

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