

# FACs working on the big picture

By Tony Law

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I certainly share your frustration with the relentless ferry fare hikes (“Joke’s on us,” Driftwood, March 26). However, it is most unfortunate that you chose to dismiss the many islanders who serve on the ferry advisory committees (FACs) as “failing to bring together the bigger picture facing coastal residents.”

This is unnecessarily discouraging both to residents who assume their FACs are representing their interests and to the committee members who put in countless hours doing exactly that. The FACs are articulating the big picture with an expertise and persistence that is impressive considering they are all volunteers.

Over 110 people up and down the coast serve on 12 FACs that provide advice to B.C. Ferries at the route-specific level. However, we have moved beyond this local role through the coordinated efforts of our chairs who are in daily communication.

The chairs meet regularly with executive members of B.C. Ferries and the ferry commissioner, specifically to address the “bigger picture facing coastal residents.”

A Coastal Community FAC has now been established involving the FAC chairs (or their delegates) with the assistant deputy minister for transportation planning and policy and the director of the marine branch of the Ministry of Transportation.

The non-government members of this committee have prepared well-researched papers that show clearly the impacts that government policy is having upon our communities. Through this consultation process we hope to provide our communities’ perspectives to the senior bureaucrats who develop the policy options for the minister.

While the FAC chairs are not advocates at the political level, we have met with the minister of transportation, we provide advice to our local governments and we provide information to the media through regular news releases.

Currently, we are researching how other governments operate their ferry systems. We are working with students at Malaspina University-College who are preparing a report on the impact of ferry fares on tourism and communities. We are offering support to Powell River Regional District which is organizing a meeting of representatives of coastal local governments with the minister. We are also setting up a web site <http://facc.gabriola.org> (thanks to the volunteer work of Gabriola’s chair, Andre Lemieux).

Save Our Ferries certainly provides some valuable information. However, the Save Our Ferries Advocacy Group was formed by the B.C. Ferry and Marine Workers’ Union

specifically to fight back against the Coastal Ferry Act. The group strives to “motivate the public to a response to the Liberal Government’s privatization agenda.”

While the unions, the Liberals and the NDP pursue the political debate about “privatization,” the well-being of our communities is continuing to be eroded. The political debate is not going to be resolved quickly or easily. Meanwhile, we need immediate action to halt the damage to coastal communities and a long-term strategy to sustain an affordable and accessible service, however it is delivered.

This requires increased provincial contributions to the ferry system, whether it is managed directly by the government (as in the past), is owned by the province but operated at arms-length (as at present) or becomes owned by the private sector (as some fear might happen in the future).

Please don’t minimize the importance of a continuing stream of letters landing on cabinet ministers’ desks. While writers may not get immediate satisfaction, the cumulative effect of letters can be significant and supports the efforts of your local governments and FACs who are working on your behalf.

The writer is chair of the Denman-Hornby Ferry Advisory Committee.