

Transportation issues come and go

By Bruce Mason, Gabriola Sounder

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Erik Andersen - president of the Gabriola Ratepayers called with good news and a question.

The most welcome update was real progress on Island roads thanks to determination and due diligence. A letter from the office of Barbara Thomas, Highways Department, Nanaimo, establishes an ongoing relationship with road contractor Emcon.

Don McLaughlin - who has direct highway maintenance and building experience - will represent the community.

On behalf of the community Erik offered a big thanks to Nick Doe whose stellar work resulted in motivating the powers that be to re-visit issues concerning "Road Goop" or "Texada slime."

Andersen also reported that the cost for a car and driver on the Washington State-run ferry from Seattle to Bainbridge Island, a 35 minute trip, is \$15, one half of the Nanaimo to Gabriola run.

"How come?" he asked.

Jim Ramsay reported that he recently traveled to Bainbridge as a foot passenger and was pleased to discover the round trip seniors fare was \$3.35 for the 35 minute trip.

In the meantime the latest ferry kerfuffle took place on Galiano, July 4th, when the last sailing was delayed by half an hour when passengers blocked the ramp of the Queen of Nanaimo after being told they couldn't board because the ferry was full.

As many as 50 foot and vehicle passengers refused to leave before the 5:55 pm sailing to Tsawwassen, from Sturdies Bay and the RCMP were called in.

Regulations allow a total of 584 passengers, to ensure access to lifesaving equipment, but protestors were upset because there was visible room for cars below deck.

The route between Galiano - the last stop before Vancouver - and Tsawwassen is reservable but was not fully subscribed.

The options, if the vessel is full, are to take a ferry to Swartz Bay or Salt Spring or remain on Galiano.

In last week's *Sounder* there were warnings about short staffing and BC Ferries spokesperson Deborah Marshall said the boat was not fully staffed because only about 200 passengers normally take the late Saturday ferry.

She said three island weddings probably caused an increase in traffic.

Irate passengers reported that a Galiano employee offered to join the staff so everyone could board but that was rejected.

This is being held up as another failure of BC Ferries operational management and residents say there are more occurrences since ferries cut staffing.

After a recount, three cars were allowed on board while passengers were asked to leave and no charges were laid.

Marshall said problems can be avoided if residents inform ferries before hosting large events and that it all comes down to safety issues.

Although the Bridge brouhaha seems to have been a media flavour of the week, for now, there are more stories about the devastating effects of fares.

One story in particular, "Ferry fares sinking smaller islands," by Jack Knox in the Times Colonist, Thursday, July 3rd is being circulated by E-mail on Gabriola.

The story reports on the impact of skyrocketing fares on the economy of Hornby Island and Rock The Boat Coalition protests - aimed at rolling fares back to 2004 levels - on that island, Denman, Cortes, Quadra and Gabriola (about 50 people assembled in Descanso Bay, July 4th).

BC Ferries is applying for fuel surcharges that would increase fares by nine per cent on major routes and 20 per cent on minor runs, where there are fewer riders to share the cost.

This hike would push the round-trip car-and-driver fare between Vancouver Island and Hornby to about \$62, compared to \$34.50 in 2003.

Add a passenger and a couple of teens, and the total would be \$98 - far too expensive for a family outing.

Here is part of what resonates from Knox's report "This is the inevitable result of the Liberals' 2003 decision to make BC Ferries independent of government (at least in theory). They argued that the corporation needed to move toward self-sufficiency and operate free of political interference. What they didn't say was they also wanted it to run free of political accountability.

"The Liberals basically devised a plan that locked BC Ferries into a course of rapidly escalating fare increases, then walked away from the responsibility for the resulting carnage in coastal communities. Not that there's much of a political penalty to shrinking Gulf Islands ferry subsidies that are now down to roughly 50 per cent of costs.

"Jealous Victorians and Vancouverites, ignoring their own massive transit subsidies, have long grumbled about propping up people who choose to live the leafy, lovely island life. This is the rule of thumb: When it's in your own backyard, government spending qualifies as wise investment in economic infrastructure. When in someone else's patch, it's unsustainable waste."

Artists, the Co-op, farmers - everybody on Hornby is suffering. The full-time population has plunged as families, no longer able to support themselves, move away, their homes scooped by the wealthy who don't need jobs and are around for short periods of time.

There are so few people in the off-season that businesses are mothballed until spring. The restaurants and pub all closed this winter, something that never happened before, starting a vicious circle.

"At least they were free of political interference," wrote Knox in a story that set off alarm bells on Gabriola.