

Tough to swallow

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DRIFTWOOD EDITORIAL

Nothing churns up anxiety in the belly of a Gulf Islander like another B.C. Ferries fare increase or fuel surcharge. Especially an unexpected one.

Despite our knowledge that the rest of the planet similarly grapples with soaring gas prices, empathy for B.C. Ferries Services Inc., which has applied for yet another hefty fuel surcharge is, at best, watery.

One aspect of the problem is that because this part of our public transportation system is no longer subject to Freedom of Information legislation, we have difficulty trusting their purported rationale and plans.

B.C. Ferries says its fuel costs tripled from \$45 million five years ago to \$135 million in 2007, far higher than the rate of crude oil or gasoline increases during the same period.

Still, assuming those figures are correct, B.C. Ferries began saving for these rainier days way back in 2005 when they first implemented fuel surcharges.

Last week B.C. Ferries chief executive officer David Hahn said the company is seeking permission from the provincial ferry commissioner to implement yet another hefty fuel surcharge before the next already-scheduled increase in the fall. And they anticipate it could take effect as early as this August.

An eight to nine per cent fuel surcharge could affect major routes and 15 to 20 per cent on minor routes — bumping a peak season trip for a car and driver up to about \$45 between Fulford Harbour and Swartz Bay, for those who don't benefit from Experience Card discounts.

As fuel pump dials roll up to unimaginable numbers, we can understand the large bill B.C. Ferries must have to swallow.

Yet when a company providing a public service chooses to simply pass on the bill to travellers, it's hard not feel regarded as nothing more than a mere consumer of a product called essential travel.

Hahn told the Globe and Mail that “consumers may not like fuel surcharges, but B.C. Ferries has no other options to cope with skyrocketing fuel prices.”

Unfortunately, the Coastal Ferries Act and the business model under which B.C. Ferries operates does not allow for decisions to reflect the best interests of residents.

It's a key reason advocacy groups say B.C. Ferries is headed “off course.”