

Proposed fare increase ignites protest

By Sean McIntyre - Gulf Islands Driftwood - June 25, 2008

Fuel charge could rise by 20 per cent

A coalition of Gulf Islands residents based on Hornby Island is calling for a coast-wide day of action on July 4 to protest the rising cost of B.C. Ferries travel.

Group member Michelle Easterly began organizing the event in late May, but said last week's announcement that it could cost up to 20 per cent more to take a ferry trip in the Gulf Islands before the end of the summer shows just how important it is for islanders to get out and make themselves heard.

"Over the past couple of months, Hornby, Quadra and Gabriola have gotten the ball rolling with ferry protests on their respective islands," she said. "Now it's time to up the ante."

Group members will help co-ordinate a series of non-violent protests, rallies, informational campaigns, parades and other festive ways of getting their message across, Easterly said Monday afternoon from her home on Hornby Island.

Events are scheduled for six islands, though nothing was planned for Salt Spring as of Monday.

"There are some people on Salt Spring working on it, but I've yet to hear back from them," she said.

In a radio interview on CKNW last week, B.C. Ferries president David Hahn said the company must increase its fuel surcharge in light of the rising cost of oil.

On "minor routes," like the Swartz Bay-Fulford and Crofton-Vesuvius routes, the return-trip for a car and driver could increase from \$37.70 to \$45.24 during the peak season.

The surcharge could increase the ticket prices on major routes by eight or nine per cent.

"If there have to be fare increases, I really do feel they should be fair and equitable," said Mafalda Hoogerdyk, president of the Salt Spring Island Chamber of Commerce. "Why should we be any different?"

She said it's about time the province look to redraw the Coastal Ferry Act to reflect the ferry system's importance to coastal residents.

Treating the ferry system as an extension of the province's highway network, Hoogerdyk said, means higher government subsidies and lower fares for island residents.

B.C. Ferries spokesperson Deborah Marshall said any decision to increase fares must receive preliminary approval from the B.C. Ferry Commission's Martin Crilly.

Marshall said implementing the fuel surcharge increase before the end of the summer would allow the company to earn additional passenger revenue during the busiest time of year.

She said B.C. Ferries' fuel costs tripled between 2003 and 2007, from \$45 million to \$135 million.

Salt Spring Ferry Advisory Committee chair Harold Swierenga learned of the proposed fuel surcharge Monday, while on the way home from a business trip in the United States.

Swierenga said he is surprised to hear the proposed increases are so high.

"It will be the first thing on my agenda when I get back [to Salt Spring]," he said.

In addition to the existing fuel surcharge, Swierenga said, the company has slowed down its vessels and invested in the new fuel-efficient C-class ships in order to cope with the rising price of fuel.

Calling the cost to replace the fleet's aging vessels a significant capital output, Swierenga called the fuel surcharge an "inevitable expense."

"B.C. Ferries is caught between a rock and a hard place," he said. "As long as the province doesn't increase the company's operating subsidy, costs will rise."

For more information or to help organize the July 4 protests, call Michelle Easterly 1-250-335-0908 or send an e-mail to mishae@mars.ark.com.