

NEWS RELEASE - from the Ferry Advisory Committee Chairs (FACC)

Missing piece in new ferry bill

05 MAY 2010 - A key recommendation by the Comptroller General is missing from the Province's proposed changes for the ferry system. That recommendation could safeguard the public service role of ferries and reconcile an apparent conflict in government goals for the system, say the Ferry Advisory Committee Chairs (FACC).

The changes are the government's response to the Comptroller General's ferry review last year. They're in a new bill that includes amendments to the Coastal Ferry Act.

But neither the current nor the new legislation state government's goals for the system. The only clues are in the ferry commissioner's guiding principles, which focus on ensuring sustainability of the ferry operator, and on moving the system toward increased user pay.

The Comptroller General's report says "there is a risk that a focus on the profitability or sustainability of the ferry operator exclusively could be at the expense of the public service mandate," and it recommends that government clarify its intentions and update legislation to reflect them.

One proposed change would require the ferry commissioner to consider the interests of ferry users. "Yet, unless the commissioner is given new goals, there's no mechanism to consider those interests along with the continuing focus on ferry operators' needs and the move toward user pay," says Tony Law of Hornby-Denman.

The FACC have conveyed to Minister Shirley Bond the importance of acknowledging the public service mandate of coastal ferries in legislation. This would do several things:

- clarify the responsibilities of ferry commissioner and the Province;
- support the government's statements when it created the new system, to "protect ferry consumers from unreasonable rate hikes" and ensure "long-term service commitments" and "modest and predictable average fare increases;"
- further provincial economic goals, coastal economic recovery, and taxpayers' interests.

"The current goals are taking us toward the limits of user pay," says Brian Hollingshead of the Southern Gulf Islands. "This is aggravated by the economic downturn and by basic provincial service fees frozen at 2003 levels. All of which has the potential to hurt the ferry system, ferry users, coastal economies, and ultimately taxpayers."

The FACC recognizes that this is a time for fiscal restraint. "But we hope that the government will support economic recovery and self-sufficiency in coastal regions by planning adequate support for ferries

in the next term of its contract with BC Ferries (2012 to 2016)," says Stephen Waugh of the North and Central Coast. "The multiplier effect of investment in essential transportation benefits the whole province."

Acknowledging the public service role for ferries in legislation is an important first step.

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BACKGROUND

1. Bill 20 - 2010: Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act (No. 3), 2010

- sections 206-224 are amendments to the Coastal Ferry Act

http://www.leg.bc.ca/39th2nd/1st_read/gov20-1.htm

2. Report on Review of Transportation Governance Models - October 2009

- report of Comptroller General's review of BC Ferries and TransLink

http://www.fin.gov.bc.ca/OCG/ias/pdf_Docs/transportation_governance.pdf

3. Coastal Ferry Act (S.B.C. 2003)

http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/00_03014_01