

## **Minister of transportation also defends subsidy to routes serving coastal communities**

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A Powell River resident has met with the minister of transportation and infrastructure to discuss cuts in ferry sailings as anger over the issue boils over on the Sunshine Coast.

Chris McNaughton, Tourism Powell River president, met with Kevin Falcon recently to discuss how the provincial government can support the Sunshine Coast economy through increased transportation and infrastructure investments. "We had an excellent conversation and were able to explore a number of initiatives that government might consider in response to our concern over BC Ferries' fares and scheduling," said McNaughton. "We also discussed highway and airport improvements for the Sunshine Coast."

Discussion points included increased provincial subsidies for BC Ferries, resident passes, student fares and assistance with travel costs for youth sport teams, reported McNaughton. "As a next step, the minister asked if I would facilitate a meeting with youth sport organizations in Powell River. The purpose of the meeting will be to examine how the provincial government can assist with youth travel costs to attend sporting events."

BC Ferries cut four sailings between Horseshoe Bay and Langdale on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. Falcon has criticized the company for not consulting with Sunshine Coast residents before eliminating the sailings. Nicholas Simons, MLA for Powell River-Sunshine Coast, organized a town hall meeting in Gibsons on Monday, October 20, to give residents an opportunity to vent their frustrations.

Falcon told the Peak in a phone interview that the input he received from McNaughton was helpful. He has also spoken to other people about the issue, he said.

"What really came through to me was that everyone recognizes that running a ferry at five per cent empty probably doesn't make a lot of sense," he said. "But they also pointed out that it has unintended impacts, particularly for families who are trying to get their kids across to hockey tournaments. That's certainly something that resonated with me. We're trying very hard in government to make sure that we have healthy kids and we want them to be involved in sporting programs."

Falcon said he has asked his staff to discuss the cancelled sailings with BC Ferries, particularly given the rapid decline in fuel costs. He said his staff will ask the company if it could not look at the cancelled sailings in light of the impacts they are having.

Falcon said he was pleased with the announcement that BC Ferries was cutting the fuel surcharge by 50 percent beginning November 4 and he was looking forward to all of it coming off in the coming months.

Falcon also defended the amount of funding the provincial government provides to subsidize BC Ferries, pointing out that 10 years ago the New Democratic Party government of the day provided \$5 million a year. "Today we are providing \$125 million," he said. "A lot of the reason why there is a significant increase in the provincial subsidy is not just to subsidize the operating costs, but also to try and rebuild a bankrupt corporation whose average fleet age was over 32 years old."

Falcon said he doesn't disagree when people contend ferries are highways for coastal communities. "But what I point out is that you will not find any part or any community in the province that sees that level of sustained ongoing investment year after year," he said. "In a 10-year period, it's well over a billion dollars of taxpayer dollars from right across the province to support making sure that there's a first-rate ferry system operating for coastal communities. I realize that's little comfort when people are paying fuel surcharges and paying the impacts they have. We've made additional multi-million dollar contributions to try and help deal with the fuel costs issues but it is a challenge."