



September 24, 2010

FACs urge better provincial funding for ferries

By Brent Richter/Staff Writer

As B.C. Ferries and the provincial government are knee-deep in negotiations that will determine the levels of services and size of fare increases for the years to come, the Ferry Advisory Committee chairs are pushing one message: keep the ferries funded.

The contract review between B.C. Ferries and the province takes place every four years. During the review, B.C. Ferries forecasts its ridership levels and costs for the next four years and the province determines how much service Ferries will provide and the amount of the ferry service fee - the amount the province subsidizes each route to make up for its losses.

Southern Sunshine Coast FAC chair Jakob Knaus said the province has a history of either shrinking its service fees or keeping them static and passing rising operating and capital costs onto ferry riders. This round, he said, appears to be no different.

"The cost will be higher because of the carbon tax. It will be higher because of the HST because whatever they buy, they have to pay HST..., collective agreement wages, they will go up and inflation, generally, will be climbing up," he said "All of these are increases in the costs and if the government doesn't chip in a bit more money, our fare increases are going to be in the double-digits."

Knaus said he would like to see the province shift its philosophy towards ferries and increase the ferry service fees from the provincial coffers, similar to how it treats highways. He said shifting more of the costs to ferry riders at a rate outpacing cost of living increases is going to hurt the economies of ferry- dependent communities.

"Ultimately, we all have to see what the fares are going to be, particularly for our commuters. The cost of living has gone up by 20 per cent and the cost of their fare goes up by 70 per cent - quite a few of them are considering whether its worthwhile living on the Sunshine Coast," he said.

Knaus said the FACs have already begun lobbying on behalf of ferry riders.

"We have already planted some seeds. We want to meet with the minister because we have to explain to him, if we have a double-digit increase, it will cripple the economies of the ferry dependent communities," he said.

B.C. Ferries is expected to submit its estimates to the B.C. Ferry Commission by the end of the month. The public will have a chance to provide input at the start of 2011.

The contract review will then be completed by September of next year.

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