

Timely warning on ferries

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The councils that represent B.C. Ferries' customers have sent a warning. Unless changes are made, the next contract between the government and the corporation could bring "double-digit fares increases or service cuts, or both."

It's a timely call for action. Every four years, the province signs a new contract with B.C. Ferries. It sets minimum service levels and the fee the government pays the corporation. That fee hasn't changed since 2003, despite sharp increases in costs. (The northern routes did receive some additional funding to address major infrastructure problems.)

The frozen funding and rising costs have resulted in sharp fare increases. Those have contributed to reduced ferry use and falling revenues, which mean still higher fares. This is obviously bad news for those who must use the ferries. It is also bad news for the Island economy, inflating costs and hurting the tourism sector.

The chairs of the dozen advisory committees called on the government to change course this month. They noted the process leading to a new agreement is under way. The current pact expires next September.

And they have specific proposals. The most significant calls for the government to increase its payment to the corporation to a level that ensures fare increases for the next four years don't exceed the inflation rate. They also want the B.C. Ferry Commission, which oversees rates, to be given a mandate to consider the public interest in reaching his decisions. The comptroller general made the same recommendation after a review of the corporation; the government did not act on it.

The government has been shifting the cost of ferry travel onto users. In 2003, its annual payment covered 22 per cent of ferry costs; that has shrunk to 16 per cent. The result has been damaging to communities throughout coastal B.C.

The ferry advisory councils are right. Unless the government increases its support, B.C. Ferries faces a downward spiral of rising fares and vanishing customers.

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