

Denman Island Residents Association
P. O. Box 17, Denman Island, B. C. V0R 1T0

November 7, 2011

Mr. Gordon Macatee,
B. C. Ferry Commissioner

Dear Mr. Macatee:

I am writing this letter on behalf of the Denman Island Residents Association (DIRA). As the representative body for the residents of Denman Island obviously the quality of our ferry service is a major concern. We are pleased that you are undertaking a review of the Coastal Ferry Act, in our view something that is long overdue. We believe you have an almost impossible task if you try to balance the various perspectives that your discussion papers suggest. We also believe your task will be a failure unless you are prepared to very publically suggest radical solutions to problems that have been building for a number of years. There is no middle ground that will solve the problems plaguing B.C. Ferries.

First of all there needs to be a fundamental shift in attitude towards the ferry system. It is part of British Columbia's highway system. Historically that was why the provincial government took control of the old Black Ball Ferry Corporation in order to establish an integrated transportation system for the province. It follows then that the government must give a level of support to the ferry system that it gives to the provincial highways. The cost of the highway improvements to Whistler, the cost of the new Vancouver Island inland highway, the cost of most highways throughout the province are paid for by ALL taxpayers. No one questions that, no one says that a particular city, town, or village should pay for all the costs of its connecting highway.

The same argument should apply to the ferry system. As part of the provincial highway system, ferries must be paid for by ALL taxpayers. Under the current circumstances, it is very easy to argue that people who live on islands are regarded as second class citizens of the province. We are not treated the same as citizens who live in Richmond, Kelowna, or Prince George, just to mention a few places. People often say that those who live on islands make a lifestyle choice and should pay for it. But no one ever says that residents of Fort Nelson, or any other town, should pay for the road that allows them to continue living there. Their provincial tax dollars pay for that. That fundamental shift in attitude needs to start with government and expand to the citizens of British Columbia.

Having recognized that the ferry system is part of the provincial highway system requires only a small step to the realization that B. C. Ferries must be made part of the Highways Ministry. The Coastal Ferry Act has to be recognized as unnecessary and, in its current form, needs to be done away with. The corporate structure of B. C. Ferries, the Board of Directors and President would be unnecessary and irrelevant. A major problem with the current structure is that it is impossible to hold the corporation accountable for their actions. The case of the cable ferry to Denman Island is an excellent example of this lack of accountability. If the cable ferry proposal occurred with the ferry system under government control we could at least express our displeasure to our elected officials and in the final analysis at the ballot box in the next election. With the B. C. Ferries Corporation we have no way to influence its decision.

The Coastal Ferry Act was established to remove the ferry system from political influence and put it on a sound business footing. We would suggest that in both these instances it has failed. Remember, not that long ago, former Premier Campbell's interference in the ferry operation by giving the corporation twenty million dollars to encourage more ferry travel. That influx of government money did nothing to improve the business standing of B. C. Ferries. Now the corporation is facing falling ridership therefore lower income levels and current losses in the millions of dollars. B. C. Ferries is not a business, it is a public service for the people of British Columbia, just as highways are a public service, and it needs to be treated as such under direct government control.

In order to avoid the kind of problem caused by the fast ferries, new legislation should establish an oversight committee made up of a majority of opposition MLA's. This could act as a valuable check on government interference and inappropriate decision making.

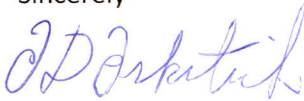
With regard to the issue of fares, we believe that an appropriate level of fares is necessary to assist the ferry system to grow and develop effectively. However, fares as they are now are too high, thus the falling ridership and the reduced income to the system. Fares must not be established to meet some supposed business requirement. As stated previously, the ferry system must not be regarded as a business. It is a service as are highways. Another way to re-enforce this concept would be to change the name of ferry fares to "tolls" just as we have some highways that have tolls. This would be a very clear recognition of ferries as part of the highway system.

The government subsidy for the ferry system should be established to foster the economic health of the coastal communities the ferries serve. There must be no distinction between route groups, the smaller island "tolls" would need to be at a higher rate in every case. With all "tolls" going to support all routes and a proper level of government support people who live on islands would finally be considered equal citizens with those who live in cities, towns and villages throughout mainland British Columbia.

As Ferry Commissioner to make these kinds of recommendations will require a good deal of political courage. If you are prepared to do it we could finally have a truly integrated transportation system for our province.

We look forward to your report.

Sincerely



Frank Frketich
President DIRA