

Driftwood Editorial- Fending off fare hikes

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BC Ferries CEO David Hahn reminded everyone last week that huge ferry fare increases are roiling in our future if something drastic isn't done.

While this issue was already put on the public radar a few months ago, this time Hahn attached some unpleasant-sounding figures to his predictions: By 2016 Gulf Islands travellers could pay 50 per cent more than they do now; major route travellers could be dinged 20 per cent and northern-route users could be awash in a 100 per cent increase.

The two obvious choices to fend off such hikes are to cut services — i.e. sailings or routes, which is where the “kill Route 9” scenario comes into play — or to receive more funds from another source — i.e. the provincial government in the form of an increased annual service fee.

The Ferry Advisory Committee Chairs, a group representing a dozen committees up and down the coast, has spoken out strongly for a need to increase government support for the public ferry system.

FACC members point out that the \$92-million service fee paid by the province to subsidize the system has not changed since 2003, adding that the province's press release on the issue used misleading figures that make it appear government support has risen substantially since 2001.

Hahn estimates an extra \$25 million per year is needed to fend off the big fare hikes. Considering how much some other expenditures have risen since 2003, a 27 per cent increase in funding for an essential service, to kick in for the 2012 year, would not be unreasonable. According to FACC, ferry fares have jumped an average of 60 per cent, and in some cases more than 100 per cent, since 2003, with inflation at only 11 per cent.

But don't expect the provincial government or any Liberal leadership candidates to jump in now and commit to a higher service fee of any amount.

The process sees Ferry Commissioner Martin Crilly first making a decision on how much BC Ferries should be allowed to raise rates, with a government response coming after.

Fortunately, ferry fare price caps is one topic area where the public is allowed to communicate directly with Crilly. Now would be a good time to do that. (See www.bcferrycommission.com.)

To put pressure in the right spot about the service fee level, contact MLA Murray Coell and Transportation Minister Shirley Bond.