

Skeena Queen Charlotte Regional District taking aim at BC Ferries' proposed increase

By [Alan S. Hale - The Northern View](#)

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Members of the Skeena Queen Charlotte Regional District board are getting set to launch a lobbying campaign to try to persuade the Provincial Government to stop BC ferries from potentially raising fares along northern routes by about 25 per cent every year from 2012 until 2016.

That means by 2016, going from the mainland to the Haida Gwaii could cost more than twice as much as it does now.

“I did a quick little calculation. If you add 25 percent, on top of 25 percent, on top of 25 percent, on top of 25 percent, our \$380 round trip for a car is going to turn into a \$900 trip pretty quickly,” said board chair, Barry Pages who is also the mayor of Masset.

According to Pages, Masset has put together a petition, slated to be finished on Monday, but he told the committee that they needed to come up with some kind of strategy to meet the problem head-on.

Prince Rupert mayor Jack Mussallem suggested that the board should be getting local MLA and former ferries critic Gary Coons in for a meeting to discuss possible actions that could be taken. Mussallem was also designated by a board to bring up the issue at an upcoming roundtable on transportation in Prince George.

Board member Bard Setso believes that they need to do much more.

“I think we need to sit down and come up with more of a strategy than just sitting down with our MLA. I think we need to launch a huge lobbying campaign requesting that the appropriate minister and BC Ferries come up to the north to have some town hall meetings. And we need to recruit as many groups as possible; special interest groups, First Nations, whatever. This is a very serious issue - This could cripple the whole island,” said Setso.

Board members are worried that such a dramatic increase in ferry costs could drive up prices for goods on Haida Gwaii and decimate the region's tourism industry.

"Right now on the island we're paying close to \$7 for a gallon of milk. The difference between that and the \$3 they pay in Rupert is mainly because of freight. You go and double those freight costs, we'll be paying \$10 for a gallon of milk," said Pages.

Knut Bjorndal from Port Edward says the board needs to do its research so it can be armed with hard numbers on the probable economic damage before taking any significant action towards trying to lobby the provincial government.

"At the end of the day, we're going to have to use that information. Without those numbers we're going to have some problems," said

Bjorndal.

For the moment, the board passed Mussallem's original motion to enlist the help of Gary Coons before deciding what to do next as it relates to the proposed increase on the routes.