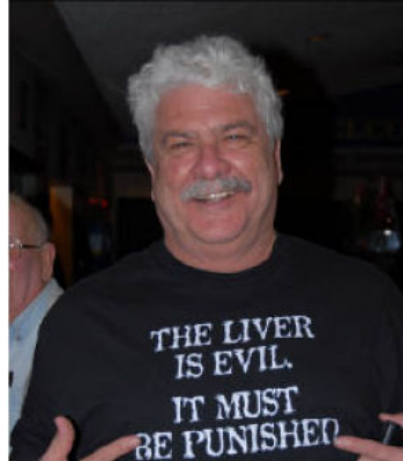


FACC to suggest service revisions from the keel up



Salt Spring's Kerry Butler

By [Sean McIntyre - Gulf Islands Driftwood](#)

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With so many unanswered questions about the future of BC Ferries' routes, fares and ridership levels, it's no wonder members of the Salt Spring Island Ferry Advisory Committee can envision scrapping everything and starting from scratch.

"I certainly don't want to guess right now, but I doubt [the result] will be the way it is right now," said Harold Swierenga, chair of Salt Spring's FAC, speaking about the ferry system's future. "It'll be different and something more useful."

Salt Spring's FAC is one of 12 such groups spread throughout regions served by BC Ferries. The committees were established as a way to gather perspectives from island residents who rely on ferry service.

Committee members, who are appointed in cooperation with local governments, the Islands Trust and First Nations, meet at public meeting throughout the year.

When the island's FAC reconvenes in March, Swierenga said, he anticipates members will have proposals to make routes serving Salt Spring more efficient, convenient and maybe even profitable.

“We are starting from scratch and looking at a clean sheet of paper,” Swierenga said. “There’s nothing sacred about Long Harbour. Certainly there will be service, but it may not be what we have right now or with the same size of ship.”

While the blank-slate approach is only an exercise, findings will be forwarded to BC Ferries’ head office in Victoria for further consideration.

How managers will react, Swierenga noted, is anyone’s guess.

News that the island’s FAC has even begun to consider alternatives to the status quo, however, is music to the ears of Kerry Butler, a retired BC Ferries employee who’s spent nearly two decades trying to solve the conundrum posed by the company’s revenue-losing minor routes in the southern Gulf Islands.

Butler’s vision would have two vessels permanently moored at Long Harbour. A smaller vessel would travel to each of the major southern Gulf Islands on its way to Swartz Bay throughout the day, while another vessel would travel in the opposite direction.

A larger ship, comparable to Long Harbour’s Queen of Nanaimo, would meet traffic from the feeder routes at Mayne Island while en route between Salt Spring and Tsawwassen.

“I developed a schedule that not only worked, it worked for 10 years into the future,” Butler said.

The scenario, Butler said, gives travellers more flexibility to travel between the major Gulf Islands without losing service to the Lower Mainland.

The best part, Butler said, is that current infrastructure, minus a second dock at Long Harbour, is already in place.

While Butler’s plan may not be perfect, it’s that kind of thinking that can bring ferry service in the region up to date and more in line with current traffic patterns, according to Saturna Island’s Brian Hollingshead, the chair of the Southern Gulf Islands Ferry Advisory Committee.

“I would like to congratulate Kerry Butler for offering this suggestion,” Hollingshead said in an e-mail. “The more ideas BC Ferries receives from the public, the better the outcome is likely to be.”

More community engagement, he added, will be necessary over the next decade as the Queen of Nanaimo nears the end of its life in the fleet. Untangling the knot of schedules and services already in place, he added, may prove more of a challenge.

“The southern Gulf Islands route maze is considerably more complex than most of us realize, even those of us who’ve lived on one of the islands for years,” Hollingshead wrote. “We all tend to see solutions in terms of what would best serve our own island. In fact, each island has its own set of needs and service expectations built around existing service.”

According to BC Ferries spokesperson Deborah Marshall, the company and its management encourage customer suggestions about how operations may be improved.

She asks anyone with route information, customer experience suggestions or any other ferry-related matters to make them known to a member of their local FAC.

“The advisory committees are really the voice of our communities,” Marshall said.

BC Ferries staff meet with local advisory committees throughout coastal communities on an annual basis. The next meeting between BC Ferries and the Salt Spring Island FAC takes place this fall.

Swierenga said he and his fellow advisory committee members hope to have the results of their research for the Salt Spring FAC’s March meeting. A specific date and location for that meeting has not been announced.