

# Liberal leadership candidates discuss ferry subsidy

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Candidates in the Liberal Party's leadership race are giving their position on a number of political issues in the run-up to the members' vote next Saturday, including how they would deal with predicted fare hikes on BC Ferries.

George Abbott took an early stance when he responded to a Feb. 4 appearance by Ferries CEO David Hahn on a Shaw TV program. Abbott issued a press release the following day, saying he was surprised to hear Hahn's assertion that either fares would have to increase significantly or service levels drop without greater government subsidy in the next term. He promised to review the Coastal Ferries Act and the subsidy level.

"Clearly, a near doubling of fares on our northern routes and a 50 per cent increase on minor routes could have repercussions to the economies of those regions," Abbott stated in the release.

According to another candidate, however, Hahn's public predictions are just a tactic to leverage more money from the government. Former transportation minister Kevin Falcon told the Globe and Mail, "It's unfortunate that he's taken the approach of trying to scare the public and stampede politicians into taking early positions on something like this . . . I think we'll end up negotiating a deal . . . There will be no massive rate increases that David is projecting."

Christy Clark has taken an even stronger position, stating in a Shaw TV debate taped Feb. 19 that as premier she would require Hahn to cover the fare increases by finding savings within the ferry corporation.

Mike de Jong's position is the most measured of the four. According to his media relations contact, Doug McLelland, de Jong recognizes the difficulty of relying on any one of three options: increasing fares, decreasing service or increasing the government subsidy.

"The challenge is finding a balance between these three alternatives," McLelland said. "This is our transportation system service for many B.C. communities, and we cannot pass on all the costs to the users or the taxpayers."

Registered members of the BC Liberals will vote for their next party leader and the province's premier by phone or online on Feb. 26.

The government decision on its ferry fare subsidy amount for 2012 to 2016 will be announced at the end of June.