

NDP wonders if Ferries boss being pushed out

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B.C. Ferries boss David Hahn faces a barrage of questions from reporters about the sinking of the Queen of the North.

Photo Credit: Debra Brash, Times Colonist

The departure of B.C. Ferries president David Hahn — who has confirmed he will leave his post in two years' time — raises questions about whether he is moving on willingly, says the NDP's critic.

"This might have been a move Hahn had to make," said NDP MLA Gary Coons (North Coast) Tuesday. "It seems like the Liberals were distancing themselves from their million-dollar man."

Transportation Minister Shirley Bond said Hahn would leave Ferries with high customer service ratings and performance improvements, but she made it clear there were concerns over his \$1 million annual compensation package.

"People continually expressed concerns about his salary. As he moves on, the next president's contract will be placed under public sector [lower] guidelines," she said.

Hahn, an American who came to Ferries in 2003 after managing a U.S. aviation company with 25,000 employees, has been called a polarizing figure and became a lightning rod for criticism.

The tumultuous times in his first eight years of office included:

The revelation he was being paid \$1 million annually, far outstripping other public sector chiefs in B.C.

"It was outrageously inflated," said Coons.

Hahn said he was running the operation like a private company and "the place was a pretty big mess" when he was hired.

The decision to award a \$334 million construction contract to a German firm to build three super ferries, which critics said exported 5,000 jobs overseas.

Hahn said taxpayers saved \$60 million.

Several fuel surcharges and fare increases were instituted over the years.

"Skyrocketing fares impacted coastal communities," said Coons.

Hahn said he was focused on customer service.

In a Feb. 5 news release, Ferries said \$1.6 billion has been invested in new capital since 2003, including \$1.2 billion in vessels, \$300 million in terminals and \$96 million in things like information technology.

Several days ago, Hahn said the ferries were projecting a \$25 million annual shortfall beginning next year.

He said a further government subsidy was needed to fill the gap or 20 to 50 per cent fare increases on some routes.

Hahn, who said in an interview with CKNW Tuesday he had never made a secret of his plans to depart in 2013 after 10 years on the job, was not available for comment.