

Politicians dragged into ferry fares again

BY LES LEYNE, TIMES COLONIST FEBRUARY 9, 2011 8:23 AM



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Photograph by: Staff, Times Colonist

After divorcing B.C. Ferries from government to avoid the horror of "political interference," Liberals must be a bit choked to find the interference is still going on.

Only now it's running in the opposite direction.

The strange hybrid "publicly owned private corporation" was set up in 2003 to keep politicians away from the ferry system. One of the reviews that led to the big makeover found B.C. Ferries "entangled in a web of formal and informal accountability to ministries and politicians."

"Political interference ... pervades every important decision," the report found.

But now ferry boss David Hahn is mischievously getting involved in politics. He's pitched the idea of a subsidy increase into the middle of Liberal and NDP leadership races.

A dozen politicians are running around offering things to people. What better time to stick your hand up and ask for something?

Appearing on Vaughn Palmer's Voice of B.C., Hahn outlined the corporation's current application to the independent Ferry Commission for approval of fare increases. B.C. Ferries has to submit a full rationale every four years to justify its request.

The current request could see fares double on the northern routes over the next four years. The minor Gulf Island routes would go up 50 per cent and major routes would see a 20 per cent hike.

Unless, said Hahn, the provincial government agrees to cut service levels or pony up some more money to subsidize the fleet.

After the commissioner makes a decision next month, the government has three months to review its position.

"In other words, do they want to increase or decrease their fee to us?" said Hahn. "Do they want to cut service or increase service? They can do anything they choose to, and then by the end of September the commissioner will make a final ruling."

Hahn said the proposed increases are "substantial."

The ferry advisory committees and government have been aware of the pressure for big increases for two or three years, Hahn said. "There's a big policy decision looming off of this, and we'll see what happens," he said.

It would take roughly \$25 million a year in new government funding -on top of the \$150 million in direct and indirect subsidies already paid annually -to bring the increases down to a rate that wouldn't provoke outrage.

Ferry advisory committees up and down the coast chimed in soon after Hahn's musings. They said even major service cuts would barely lower fares, because most of the system's big costs are fixed.

"Only the provincial government can substantially reduce projected fares," they said.

Their standard plea is that coastal communities need affordable transportation like everyone else. "Ferry subsidies are modest compared with government support for other forms of transportation."

The basic subsidy that makes up the bulk of the government's contribution to running the system is a \$92million annual payment that's been frozen since 2003.

When the issue eventually lands on the new premier's desk, a hardhearted new leader will either do nothing and let the fares rise or allow significant service cuts to reduce the increases a bit.

What coastal residents want is a soft-hearted premier who will hear their pleas and increase the government's contribution.

Hahn's gambit got a mixed response from the Liberals. The frontrunners were all involved in splitting B.C. Ferries from government. They must be aware of the irony in the corporation playing politics with them, instead of the other way around.

Kevin Falcon, a former transportation minister, said Hahn was playing games. He said it was unfortunate scare tactics were being used and lots of negotiations lay ahead before a decision is made.

George Abbott said he was surprised to hear the proposed increases were so large, acknowledged they would have repercussions and promised to review the matter.

On the NDP side, leadership candidate John Horgan served notice that Hahn, "the million-dollar man," should take a pay cut if he's worried about fare hikes.

All that work to get rid of the politics, and they're still rampant.

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