

# Letter - Islands need ferry-supported vibrant economy

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Jacob Knaus, chair of the Southern Sunshine Coast Advisory Committee, has made an important point in his Feb. 16 letter: “BC Ferries is an integral part of the provincial transport infrastructure.”

And that is where the confusion begins. What part of it is it?

Many have said it is a part of the highway system, others that it should be treated similarly to BC Transit, but neither analogy seems to me to be correct.

Surely, a ferry is a “motorized bridge.” In situations where a land connected bridge would not be economical, a ferry, or motorized bridge is needed to “bridge” the gap.

Therefore, as Jacob Knaus has said, ferries should be treated in the same way that land based bridges are — being critical links to BC communities dependent upon them, and they should be funded similarly.

Naturally, we expect, as users, to pay the running costs. Nobody would argue with that. However, the capital costs (i.e. interest on the debt), depreciation and reasonable maintenance charges should be for the transportation ministry.

I, for one, am a supporter of the current incorporated structure. It places accountability and responsibility where it belongs — with BC Ferry Services Inc. The fast ferries fiasco is a living monument to the need to ensure that those responsible are the ones to shoulder the risks. The purchase of new ferries is best left to BC Ferries management, who can be expected to be the most knowledgeable and to understand the risk/reward relationships involved.

However, BC Ferries is the primary link to many B.C. communities which are vibrant contributors to the B.C. economy.

While raising fares may make sense on narrow return on investment criteria, doing so can be counter productive when you look at the wider implications for the B.C. economy.

Our politicians and government officials need to ask themselves a simple question: Do higher ferry fares result in a net increase in the provincial economy's growth or do they result in a contraction?

When BC Ferries was established, I don't think the question of linkage to the broader economy was a consideration, but if you consider the ferry system to be a vital artery linking all parts of the provincial "body," then a healthy circulatory system is crucial. Higher fares constrict the "circulation" and "frostbite" at our remote communities may result.

Now would be a good time to enter into a discussion on the best role for BC Ferries, and the pricing and cost structure that makes the most sense in support of a vibrant B.C. economy.

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