



## **Bell Island Ferry Users Committee**

February 7, 2011

Honourable Tom Hedderson  
Minister of Transportation and Works

Dear Minister

**Subject: Action plan urged to reverse service decline and a commitment for a user friendly service**

The Users Committee, following 2 recent special meetings, is seeking a meeting leading to a desired action plan to reverse the erosion of the quality of the Bell Island ferry service. The Committee is seeking efforts to make the ferry service more user-friendly and more efficiently operated.

The Committee is disillusioned and discouraged. Each day we see this service fall further and further into decline and unreliability which is leading to a reversal of the buoyant gains made in employment and economic activity on Bell Island in recent years.

A few days ago we presented our annual pre –budget brief to your Colleague the Minister of Finance. The brief was quite revealing and was well received by the Minister. We encourage the attached copy be reviewed as part of your consideration of our letter.

On most issues there would be agreement that there are a number of structural problems that needed to be acted upon sooner rather than later.

These structural problems include:

**a. Replacement needed of aged and inadequate vessels :**

Our two aging vessels need replacement as well as replacing the inadequate support vessel the Nonia. With over 15% of the scheduled round trips (over 1000) cancelled in the past year (of which 75% were not weather related) the evidence is compelling and the disruption caused undeniable.

**b. Crewing- Establishing 12 hour shifts and reclassification of ferry workers posts:**

There are pressures on the schedule from:

- i. Hours of rest
- ii. Adequate maintenance time
- iii. Being able to deliver efficient operations
- iv. Ability to compete for engineers and captains in the marketplace etc

These matters point to the urgency to sit down with the Marine Workers union and negotiate an agreement on 12 hour shifts and pay reclassifications. The service schedule needs are in direct conflict with reality for hours of rest and maintenance and compliance with laws and a double shift is the only solution.

**c. Essential service designation for Intra Provincial Ferry services**

Just as the Province advocates for essential ferry services for the Marine Atlantic service, the justification for this essential status is just as important for the Intra Provincial ferries. The essential service designation will avoid strikes disrupting island economies such as Bell Island's commuter service, (the only such service in the Province). The NLFM has submitted a 2010 resolution seeking same.

**d. Scheduled sailings resolution –work in progress :**

In recent days we have been in turmoil responding to the shocker schedule cuts being proposed. We will not address this matter in this letter except to say that the interim schedule, now temporarily in place, fails our community. If the 2.5 hour breaks for the ferries at lunch time is not reversed, this will cut the legs from underneath our economy. We have identified a number of alternatives that ensure these noon breaks do not exceed 1.5 hours and will be sharing these in a separate paper being prepared. (Separate submission to follow)

**e. Schedule and other issues requiring attention:**

With respect to the ferry schedule we are also concerned with:

- Questionable and interrupted delays in sailings
- An apparent haphazard assignment and deployment for refit schedules
- The annual record of non sailing of 15 % of the scheduled sailings
- The cancellation of morning sailings following overnight medical callouts is creating havoc for workers trying to hold down employment
- The lack of deck watch service by crew during sailings begs to be remedied
- The unwillingness to rotate additional rest periods during sailings
- Addressing the considerable time devoted to selling tickets after vessels arrive  
Opportunity to free up time for more maintenance and more flexibility of trips.
- The inconsistent and unfair practice of allowing the Beaumont Hamel to use 4 lanes for onboard traffic when assigned to Fogo Island service and only 3 lanes on Bell island
- The assignment of times to fuel the ferry needs improvement
- The dinner time practice of the crews being allowed to go home during the noon break when they are specifically being paid to stay aboard the vessels
- The schedule has the same 20 minute wait time assigned at both terminals yet the ticket selling which consumes the time only takes place on the mainland side
- The carrying capacity of the Beaumont Hamel at 106 remains a serious concern especially when we have the other ferry out of service and it needs to be addressed
- The lack of ferry related parking in Portugal Cove terminal begs to be addressed

**f. Operational inefficiencies**

**i. Ticketing system dysfunctional :**

The ticketing system is antiquated and needs to be modernized. Increased time for maintenance and additional sailings are being lost due to the outdated technology and practices. It is a fact that of the 20 daily sailings the ferries are docked a good four hours while individual tickets are sold after the vessels arrive. It must be overhauled

**ii. Shore based manager post needs to be re-instated :  
Communications policies and practices need overhaul:**

There is litany of concerns related to the withdrawal of the shore based manager from Portugal Cove. It is not in the interest of users or Government to try to manage the Province's largest service part time from the Confederation Building or Lewisporte. Employees have no leadership or direction and issues are not being addressed. The ferry users have little access to anyone to seek info and direction. This is putting the captains under undue stress and there is no consistency to operating practices or communication. Management is effectively disengaged from the service and the crews appear to be adrift because no one is properly overseeing their day to day work.

The updates on the schedules tapes are unprofessional, inaccurate and not up to date and the shore based electronic signs are not put to effective use.

**iii. Terminal buildings in dire need of replacement:**

The ferry terminal buildings have more than outlived their usefulness and are a disgrace. The facilities are not only poorly maintained but are rat infested and dirty. There is only seating for 10 people inside the waiting rooms, there is no access to drinking water or fountains, the toilets are inadequate, parents have no accessibility to changing facilities for babies, etc.

The offer to have new facilities acquired through rental arrangement is welcomed and needs to be followed through on with a sense of priority.

**iv. Cove Terminal vehicular access, ferry lanes and parking deficiencies**

Work was begun in 2010 to begin to address improved road safety and more ferry lane parking. Both Wabana and PCSP Councils reps have met with and written the Department on concerns related to safety and oversights related to the tendered construction program. To date these matters have not been addressed and need to be.

As well, a commitment is needed to have the construction work now under tender completed and readied before the peak July –August tourism season.

Committee members and ferry users at times wonder whether Marine Services officials' actions appear to portray a lack of interest and commitment in providing a user friendly and efficient service.

The service level provided is felt to be in decline with obvious negative consequences for Bell Island, its economy, its workers, its tourism and its economic potential.

Frustrations have caused many to ponder the merits of studying the economic feasibility of a "fixed link" as a more effective, efficient and economical way to provide a transportation link to Bell Island.

All stakeholders need to become engaged and an action plan considered before the service falls into worse decline.

To that end we are requesting a meeting to begin the process.

Yours sincerely

Chairperson  
Mayor Gary Gosine

Cc -David Brazil-MHA

Attachment –Pre budget Brief