

A telling report from another coast – It's different there . . . and it's better

By Bob Exell

Anxious islanders turned out en-masse last December when the deputy minister of transportation visited to consult with them on improvements to ferry service. Big changes were in the works, he reported. A new vessel would be built locally at a cost of more than \$9,000,000, and the provincial government had the funds available.

This was not, of course, in British Columbia. This was on the tiny island of Tancook, in Mahone Bay off Nova Scotia's south shore. I found it while searching for an island ferry service elsewhere in Canada that might reasonably be compared to that of Lasqueti.

As in British Columbia, ferries are important to Nova Scotia. But unlike the government of British Columbia, which abrogated responsibility for coastal marine transportation in 2003, the government of Nova Scotia remains hands-on, rejecting privatization.

A private but publicly-supported company, Bay Ferries Ltd., operates two routes across the Bay of Fundy to New Brunswick and Maine, but the province itself maintains a fleet of smaller ferries servicing two little Atlantic islands and creating highway links and shortcuts across waterways on the mainland and Cape Breton Island. These cable ferries and motor vessels not only provide communities with everyday service but stay on-call 24/7 for emergencies.



MV William G. Ernst is one of the self-propelled vessels, taking passengers and freight to the historic fishing villages of Tancook and Little Tancook.

Big Tancook is small—at 550 acres not even the size of Jedediah—and lightly populated compared to Lasqueti. Off-season its population is estimated to be 135 persons max. During the summer it swells to perhaps 250. Residents are primarily lobster fishers, as are the 25-or-so residents of Little Tancook.

William G. Ernst, like Centurion VII, is an older twin-diesel, built in 1982. Like Centurion, it cruises at nine to 10 knots. The passage to Tancook from Chester on the mainland—just over seven nautical miles and about 50 minutes—is comparable to the Lasqueti route or 10 nautical miles and an hour or more. The Ernst carries up to 95 persons, the Centurion, 60. Both vessels experience weather cancellations from time to time.

But there the parallels end. In every other way, service to Lasqueti is comparably inferior. The difference seems to be that in Nova Scotia the provincial government takes islanders needs seriously.

First, the role of the Ernst, unlike Centurion, is more than just about moving passengers from Point A to Point B. It's uniquely a multi-purpose vessel for the community—passenger ferry, school bus, container ship and barge. It makes 26 round-trips a seven-day week. Winter or summer a round-trip costs \$7.00 but most users buy an annual pass for \$162.00. Kids 12 and under are free. Lasqueti has 14 round-trips a five-day week at a peak-season cost of \$23.50. There are no annual passes. Kids under six are free.

Unlike Centurion, on the Ernst there is no charge for bicycles, pets or freight whatever its size. Aluminum containers made available by the crew for the stowage of larger freight are hoisted onto the ship by its on-board crane. Passengers carry their personal belongings into the cabin.



At Chester and Tancook the vessel departs from true wharves, not floats like those at False Bay and French Creek. It has a vehicle ramp and enough space for a car or small truck which can be loaded when the tide permits. The cost is \$20.00 for a vehicle and \$10.00 for an ATV or motorcycle. Beyond that passengers never pay anything extra.

In Nova Scotia there will be no fare increase this year or in the foreseeable future on any of the routes the province operates. The standard fare of \$7.00 prevails throughout the province. Our fares go up April 1.

Weekdays the Ernst makes four round-trips, serving both Big and Little Tancook. The four-man crew overnights on Big Tancook and embarks on the day's first sailing at 6 a.m. On the 7 a.m. return the ferry picks up school kids at Little Tancook. Others join the boat at Big Tancook for the 8 a.m. sailing. That puts students in Chester for school before 9 a.m. The school on Tancook teaches students only up to grade six.

From the Halifax/Dartmouth metropolitan area it's about a 45-minute drive to Chester. Yet on Friday evenings there are two additional sailings from Chester, at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m.—late sailings for weekenders and locals wanting to get home for the weekend.

As Lasqueti weekenders know so well, sailings from French Creek, the first at 9:45 a.m. and the last at 5:30 p.m., are the same Fridays as on three of the other four days the ferry operates.



To update its fleet the Nova Scotia government last year issued tenders for two new ferries. A third is pending. It's likely all of the vessels will be built in the Maritimes. Nova Scotia has an active shipyard,

A.F. Theriault & Sons, between Digby and Yarmouth, which boasts that since 1938 it's built more than 500 boats, some as large as 48 metres long.

As I write this B.C. Ferries (its recent vessels were built in Romania and Poland) has entered into a contract with Western Pacific Marine to continue its long-standing service to Lasqueti. The new contract takes effect April 1 and, as before, is expected to be for four years, with a four-year extension. Except for minor housekeeping the new contract will mirror the old; just more of the humdrum same.

When the Nova Scotia transportation deputy, Paul LaFleche, attended the town-hall meeting in December he brought with him three of his top officials. Here, the B.C. ministry of transportation and Infrastructure proposes an annual ferry consultation meeting be held with Lasqueti residents. OK. But as Mark Collins, president of B.C. Ferries, wrote to me almost two years ago, "All authority over service levels, round trips, and service provision rest with the provincial government . . . it is important that everyone understands BCF does not control this. The ministry is where the authority to make changes rests."

Do government officials plan to attend the consultation meetings? They do not.

Or would B.C. Ferries' vice-president of community engagement, Brian Anderson, make the trip to hear-out with the locals? Not necessarily, for the ministry proposes only that the meeting be arranged directly by Western Pacific Marine, "in cooperation with B.C Ferries."

Could it then just be us and Allan Knapp?

The government of Nova Scotia, with financial help from the federal government, is spending many millions of dollars upgrading its vessels and improving its ferry services on its seven routes residents but for the health and growth of its tourism industry as well as for residents. It's engaged.

The government of British Columbia, which receives financial help from the federal government for marine transportation throughout coastal B.C., annually writes a cheque for \$3,000,000-plus to B.C. Ferries to contract out ferry services on Lasqueti and six minor northern routes. There its interest ends.

No senior official of the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure has ever been to Lasqueti. Neither the president of B.C. Ferries nor any of his eight vice-presidents have ever been to Lasqueti. Yet, in their collective wisdom, these two parties have ensured that the service shortcomings Lasqueti has experienced since 1979 will endure until 2028.

That's one-year shy of a half-century.

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