What’s happened to our ferry service since 2013?
Timeline

**November 2013** - The Provincial Government announced cuts to many ferry services including Route 19 between Gabriola and Nanaimo, on which annualised savings of $400,000 were to be found by cutting the last two round trips each evening and the first round trip at weekends.

**December 2013** - BC Ferries and government officials listen to community concerns and tasked Ferry Advisory Committees to work with BC Ferries to develop a schedule that would meet the government’s required financial targets, but minimise the adverse impact on the community.

**March 2014** – After weeks of discussions, a compromise schedule was agreed with BC Ferries, safeguarding the late evening service but creating gaps during the daytime and early evening. The FAC expressed concerns about the potential for delays and overloading in the proposal but agreed to monitor performance closely.

**April 2014** - The revised schedule came into effect on 28 April 2014, four weeks later than planned, and a 50% fare was introduced for BC Seniors travelling on previously “free” days.

**Summer 2014** - The weaknesses of the revised schedule were quickly apparent. Gaps in the daytime schedule caused long tail-backs of traffic on Gabriola with a significant increase in delays and overloads. Ferry usage was dropping rapidly as residents and tourists alike lost confidence in the service.

**September 2014** – With the peak summer over, BC Ferries implemented a modified interim schedule for the winter months to improve on-time performance while the FAC explored options for a more sustainable service in 2015

**November 2014** – FAC consulted the community on options put forward by BC Ferries. Gabriolans prioritise the need for late evening services over the early morning departure in order to ensure an adequate service is provided during the day.

**April 2015** – Revised schedule implemented with first departure from Gabriola at 6.15am and a regular daytime service restored on weekdays, allowing extra time between sailings.

**Summer 2015** – Service reliability returns to pre-2014 levels but gaps in weekend schedule lead to further overloads, especially at holiday periods. Traffic levels still down in peak summer.

**November 2015** – FAC submits evidence to BC Ferries to demonstrate a business case for reinstating early afternoon sailings on peak summer weekends

**March 2016** – BC Ferries agrees a two-year pilot for extra weekend sailings in peak summer.
Elsewhere on the coast....

Across the BC Ferries network, the effects of the 2014 service cuts were not consistent. Many routes experienced a loss of traffic in 2014/15, while others remained stable. During 2015 and early 2016, traffic was recovering strongly, with most routes reporting up to 5% growth beyond 2013 levels. However, the service cuts of 2014 appear to have had a more significant impact on traffic using Route 19 and even now, they have yet to recover to 2013 levels. This report looks at some of the reasons why.

BC Ferries publishes monthly traffic statistics, but recognising underlying trends can be difficult due the different number of days in each month, the occurrence of a leap year or the fact that Easter can occur either in March or April. A more reliable perspective is obtained by converting the data into average daily usage, as shown in the charts on the following page.

In each chart, the impacts of the 2014 service cuts and fare increases are evidenced by the gap between the 2013 (black) line and the 2014 (blue) line. Both charts show a degree of recovery in 2015 (red line) but emphasise where traffic levels still fall short of the 2013 baseline.

At first sight, it appears that traffic in 2016 (green line) is recovering more strongly, though an early Easter in 2016 will have had an upward influence traffic volumes in March, while the trend may have been suppressed slightly in April as a result.
Vehicle and Passenger Traffic (by month)

Route 19: Average daily vehicle traffic (by month) since 2013

Route 19: Average daily passenger traffic (by month) since 2013
On-time Performance of the ferry service

Prior to 2011, punctuality of Gabriola’s ferry service had slumped to an all-time low, with fewer than 80% of sailings departing within 10 minutes of their scheduled time. A modified schedule introduced in 2011 had the immediate effect of bringing performance up to 90% - with further successive improvements to 95% by 2013. Punctuality reports (which are made quarterly to the Ferry Commissioner) show that performance in 2013 only fell below 95% in mid summer.

In 2014 performance started to deteriorate with the introduction of the new schedule in April. By mid-summer only 78% of departures operated within 10 minutes of scheduled time. While weekend performance was generally much stronger, on weekdays virtually every departure between 9am and 5pm routinely suffered delays.

The interim schedule introduced in September 2014 brought about a recovery to near-normal levels in the Fall, but in the first three months of 2015 it had slumped once more. However, when the present schedule came into operation in April 2015, there was a marked improvement with punctuality at over 90% through the peak summer and up to 98% in the Spring and Fall quarters.
Overloading of the ferry

Each quarter, BC Ferries reports the percentage of departures that are overloaded, resulting in vehicle traffic being left behind. Not surprisingly, the number of overloaded sailings always increases in mid-summer, rising from 2-3% in winter to 8% in summer.

However, summer 2014 saw a dramatic rise in the reported overloads to 11% - and in reality, the customer’s perception was actually much worse. Once the ferry was more an 30 minutes late, vehicles which arrived in anticipation of the following departure joined the back of the waiting line-up and in many cases visible overloads of 10-15 vehicles were assumed to be traffic for the next sailing and not reported as an overload.

For most of 2015, the revised schedules have restored the position to pre-2013 levels, but overloads continued above the expected level in mid-Summer – made worse by the missing early afternoon sailing on Saturdays and Sundays, which led to overloads on successive departures from Nanaimo on Saturdays and from Gabriola on Sundays. The FAC has now successfully demonstrated the business case for reinstatement of the 1.50pm from Gabriola and 2.25pm from Nanaimo on Summer weekends and it is anticipated that fewer overloads will result in Summer 2016.
Vehicle Capacity Utilisation

A measure which is widely used to compare the relative performance of each ferry route is Vehicle Capacity Utilisation – specifically, the percentage of available deck space that is occupied by vehicles. Each vessel in the fleet has a notional vehicle capacity (based upon the number of “automobile equivalents” that can be accommodated on the vehicle decks) and the percentage of that space occupied on each route is reported quarterly by BC Ferries.

Vehicle occupancy inevitably varies both seasonally and by time of day, but as this chart shows, the overall occupancy rate on Route 19 continues to rise from the 45% reported in 2013 to its current average of around 50% in 2015/16.

In peak summer 2015, vehicle capacity utilisation reached an all-time high of 57.3% – among the highest of all of the minor ferry routes. For customers, this translated in the busiest month (August 2015) to almost every sailing from Gabriola between 7am and 3pm, and from Nanaimo between 2pm and 7pm close to, or at full capacity for vehicle traffic, with correspondingly high numbers of overloaded sailings.
Impacts of the 2014 service reduction

All of the evidence so far demonstrates that the majority of the 3.5% overall reduction in traffic between 2013 and 2014 has been recovered in 2015 – and that in the early months of 2016, traffic levels are close to (and in some cases slightly above) the equivalent 2013 levels. However, as the chart on Page 3 indicates, the majority of other ferry routes have experienced traffic growth of between 3% and 5% over the same period.

The lack of similar growth on Route 19 primarily reflects the impacts of the service cuts in April 2014. To understand where those cuts have impacted [and, conversely, where there is evidence that underlying traffic growth has taken place] a more detailed examination of changes in traffic volumes by time of day and day of the week starts to reveal the impacts more clearly.

For clarity, this section compares traffic levels in the six months May-October 2013 with the same period in 2015 and examines the changes in traffic volume that can be directly attributed to the reduction in service.

Weekdays

Combining the 5.25am and 6.30am departures from Gabriola on weekdays (from April 2015)

Examination of traffic data before and after these departures were combined at 6.15am indicates that the combined departure now carries an average 8 vehicles and 12 passengers less than were previously carried on the two separate departures. This traffic appears to have been lost completely.

Overall, vehicle traffic leaving Gabriola before 9am on weekdays has declined by 2%, while passenger numbers have increased by 4%. Leaving aside the direct impact of losing the 5.25am sailing, underlying growth of 3% in vehicle traffic and 7% in passenger traffic seems to have occurred on the remaining sailings.

Changes to weekday daytime services (from April 2014 and subsequent changes in April 2015)

Despite the reinstatement of daytime services in 2015, the number of vehicles carried between 9am and 3.30pm on weekdays remains 2% lower than it was in 2013, while passenger traffic has increased by 2% - suggesting that more vehicle drivers and passengers are now travelling as walk-on passengers.

Afternoon commuter services leaving Nanaimo between 3.30pm and 7.30pm on weekdays

Although services have remained essentially unchanged through the afternoon peak period, vehicle traffic leaving Nanaimo has declined by 6% between 2013 and 2015, and passenger traffic is down by 2%.

The factors that have influenced this decline are likely to be the permanent loss of traffic that previously travelled into Nanaimo on the 5.25am departure from Gabriola and the ongoing shift from vehicles to travelling as walk-on passengers by regular commuters seeking to avoid the cost of vehicle fares.
**Reductions to evening services (from April 2014 and subsequently amended in April 2015)**

Until April 2014, evening services on weekdays left Nanaimo at 8.20pm, 9.25pm, 10.25pm and 11.30pm.

From April 2014, the 9.25pm departure was removed to facilitate a crew meal break, and subsequent departures were retimed to leave Nanaimo at 10.05pm and 11.05pm (except Wednesdays, when the 10.05pm did not operate). In April 2015, the meal break was moved earlier in the evening to achieve compliance with BCF’s collective agreement and the 8.20pm departure from Nanaimo was retimed to 9pm, creating a gap in service from 7.20pm until 9pm.

The ongoing impact of these changes to mid-evening services has been a permanent reduction of 17 vehicles and 35 passengers leaving Nanaimo between 8pm and 9.30pm on weekdays and a consequent decline in the volume of traffic in the opposite direction. Traffic volumes on the later departures from Nanaimo have seen no increase in traffic and remain low.

The net result is that, since 2013 there has been a 19% decline in vehicle traffic and a 17% decline in passengers after 7.30pm on weekdays.

**Weekends**

**Removal of the 5:25am departure from Gabriola at weekends (from April 2014)**

Despite the withdrawal of this first departure from Gabriola on Saturdays and Sundays, the number of vehicles leaving Gabriola before 9am has increased by 4% on Saturdays and by 11% on Sundays, with similar increases in passenger numbers.

On Sundays, the evidence suggests that (in the summer months, at least) weekend visitors are leaving the island to start their journey home earlier in the day than they did in 2013.

**Reduction of daytime services at weekends (from April 2014; modified April 2015)**

Since April 2014, the early afternoon round trip (1.50pm from Gabriola, 2.25pm from Nanaimo) has been withdrawn at weekends, creating a 2.5 hour gap in service. The impact, whilst different on Saturdays from Sundays, has been increasing overloads on successive sailings and an overall decline in traffic – most notably in the peak summer period.

On Saturdays, this gap in service impacts on shopping trips to Nanaimo, which now either have to be completed in time for the 1.10pm ferry or necessitate waiting until 3.45pm. As a result, the 3.45pm departure routinely overloads and, in August 2015 there were 24 fewer vehicles and 67 fewer passengers leaving Nanaimo on Saturdays between 1pm and 5pm than in 2013, representing a 4% loss of daytime traffic in the summer months.

The impact on Sundays has been felt more strongly on the Gabriola side, where the absence of a 1.50pm departure means it is no longer possible to connect with either the 3pm ferry from Departure Bay or the 3.15pm from Duke Point. Overloads have occurred both before and after the missing sailing and in August 2015, there were 38 fewer vehicles and 94 fewer passengers leaving Gabriola on Sundays between 12pm and 5pm than in 2013 (a 6% traffic loss).

Despite these specific impacts, the underlying trend in daytime traffic at weekends is more positive. On Saturdays, vehicle traffic between 9am and 7.30pm has remained at 2013 levels, while on Sundays it has increased overall by 3% compared to 2013. Daytime passenger traffic has declined by 2% on Saturdays but increased by 1% on Sundays.
Reductions to evening services at weekends

As on weekdays, the 9.25pm departure was removed in April 2014 to facilitate a crew meal break, and subsequent departures were retimed to leave Nanaimo at 10.05pm and 11.05pm on Saturdays and 10.30pm on Sundays. In April 2015, the meal break was moved earlier in the evening to achieve compliance with BCF’s collective agreement and the 8.20pm departure from Nanaimo was retimed to 9pm, creating a gap in service from 7.20pm until 9pm. However, this enabled the late evening services (10pm and 11pm) to be reinstated on Sundays.

The impact on weekend travel has been similar to that experienced on weekdays, with the number of vehicles and passengers carried after 7.30pm declining by 16% on Saturdays and 17% on Sundays between 2013 and 2015.

Conclusions

Evidenced by BC Ferries data, the immediate impacts of the service reductions outlined above account for an average net loss of 47 vehicle journeys and 66 passenger journeys per day between 2013 and 2015.

Taking the six-month period used for this analysis (May-October) BC Ferries reports indicated the average daily number of vehicles carried declined from 1,007 per day in 2013 to 977 per day in 2015 (a 3% reduction). In the absence of any service reductions it is estimated that the number of vehicles carried would have increased from 1,007 per day to 1,024 per day (a net increase of 1.7%).

Over the same period, the average number of passenger journeys was reported to have declined from 2,299 per day to 2,276 (a 1% reduction). In the absence of any service reductions it is estimated that the number of passengers carried would have increased from 2,299 per day to 2,365 per day (a net increase of 2.9%).

Expressed another way, the service reductions imposed on our ferry route appear to have directly contributed to a 4.7% decline in vehicle traffic since 2013 and a 2.9% reduction in passenger journeys. Thus, had the service reductions not been made, the traffic comparison shown in the chart on Page 3 of this report would have been more consistent with other routes: