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Cards to replace ferry commuter tickets

BC Ferries is proposing to replace discount commuter tickets with magnetic stripe cards. Regular ferry users currently purchase books of commuter tickets in advance, and use them over a period of time; these are a sort of BC Ferries 'IOU', and currently have no time limit. The corporation has now proposed that unused trips will expire after 90 days.

Books of commuter tickets are used by many Islanders who make frequent use of minor routes up and down the coast (including Horseshoe Bay - Langdale, not such a minor route). The discount varies wildly between routes (it is 50% on the Campbell River-Quadra Island run), mainly due to historical factors which the corporation has never attempted to straighten out.

The Coast Card

The proposed new card, which has been dubbed the 'Coast Card', would enable the user to access an account on BC Ferries' computer. The account would record the number of prepurchased trips remaining to be used on each ferry run. (If the user held, for example, separate commuter tickets for vehicle and passenger from Swartz Bay to both Salt Spring Island and the Outer Gulf Islands, then these would be recorded in the account as balances for four separate 'products'.)

As customers pay in advance for each of these 'products', the recorded balances of trips remaining would be updated; as trips were used, the balances would be drawn down; the outstanding balance of trips remaining would be shown on the ticket when it was issued.

In case the magnetic stripe becomes unreadable, BC Ferries has a 'belt and braces' approach—the card will include both a bar code and an account number. But the card itself must be presented at the ticket booth to use the account—just the number won't be sufficient.

Use It or Lose It

The most contentious feature of the new system is a 'Use it or Lose it' rule, which would mean that the trips expire 90 days after the date of original purchase. As BC Ferries president David Hahn explains it, this would limit the usefulness of the new system to users who make ten trips within a 90-day period; anyone else is apparently defined as a not-frequent-enough traveller. (Note that the Langdale route sells five-trip

vehicle ticket books; there is no indication whether these might be discontinued.)

Hahn points out that the new system has yet to be discussed with the many local Ferry Advisory Committees up and down the coast.

For users of long distance phone cards, or the cards used to purchase cellphone time in advance, the principle will be familiar. However, the Coast Cards themselves will not record the trips remaining; these records will only be found in BC Ferries' computer. While it would be possible for a family or company on one account to have several cards, each card would have to carry its own balance of trips remaining; balances could not be shared between cards.

According to BC Ferries, cards could be registered to the user or unregistered (in effect, 'bearer' cards); registered cards, if lost or stolen, could be replaced; if found, could be returned. Unregistered cards, of course, could not. The user would be identified based on a 'customer profile', the contents of which have not been revealed.

Why?

BC Ferries has quoted a number of reasons for the new system. They point to misuse of the current system, where books of tickets are shared by several people, can be lost or stolen, or are used by infrequent travellers over long periods of time (during which ferry fares are rising rapidly). They also cite 'reduction of paper' as one reason for the new system.

The ferry corporation would prefer not to carry what they term a 'deferred liability' (the IOU referred to above) on their books, and that is one of the reasons they propose that unused trips should expire after 90 days.

BC Ferries says that the 'Coast Card' is 'responsible revenue management' and also points to the possibility of purchasing trips in advance over the Internet, and of an 'automatic replenishment' system, which would mean BC Ferries can just charge your credit card when you run out of trips.

But, as pointed out by veteran ferry user John Sprungman, 'Our present ticket books have no time limit on their use. Years ago when there was a time limit, ferry users could mail in out-of-date tickets for a refund. Now they propose a system in which pre-paid travel which is not used within a specified time would be forfeited. He (Hahn) acknowledges that the time limit is an 'unresolved' issue. It will be a big one.' ☞

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