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Inter-provincial Ferry Service in the Maritimes

Submitted by the Saint John Board of Trade

As part of the national highway system, the inter-provincial ferry service in the Maritimes provides essential services to commercial and non-commercial traffic. For commercial traffic, it provides an alternate multi-modal transportation route that also contributes to inter-provincial trade by reducing time and usage of the road highway systems. For non-commercial traffic the marine highways provide support to local tourism industries.

Transport Canada's Sustainable Development Strategy 2007-2009 emphasizes the importance of the multi-modal transportation system to Canada's economy and Canadians' quality of life. It further states that "transportation policy must provide a framework that addresses the three elements of sustainable transportation- social, economic, and environmental". The use of ferry systems in the Maritimes exemplifies this need for efficient multi-modal means of transportation.

The Maritimes has several ferry services that are essential to the survival of various communities. Two of the ferry services that will be facing closure or cutbacks within the next several years are the Saint John-Digby Ferry and the Caribou-Wood Islands Ferry. Both of these services provide cultural, economic and environmental benefits to the communities they serve.

The Saint John-Digby Ferry is an important link between the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The service is a continuation of history to both sides as it began in 1783. As a year round ferry service, it has the potential for future development as a part of the Atlantic Gateway. Currently, 75% of the commercial traffic on the Digby Ferry is headed to the United States market.

The ferry service has a very positive impact on the tourism of the region. It has been found that people from Southwest Nova Scotia are using the Ferry service and staying, shopping and attending events in Saint John and Southwestern New Brunswick. Given the multitude of positive aspects associated with the economic growth of greater Saint John, especially as it becomes an Energy Hub the altering or elimination of any major transportation infrastructure should be carefully considered with the long-term effects in mind. As part of the Atlantic Gateway, the potential of the ferry service is great with respect to commercial traffic.

With respect to the environment, the reduction of CO₂ emissions from cars and commercial vehicles that travelled on the Digby Ferry in 2005 was 3,400 tonnes. This number is significant as it is after consideration of the vessel's CO₂ emissions.

Cessation of either of the Ferry services in the Maritimes would have a negative overall impact to the growth and vitality of the region. The 2006 Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) study showed a net annual loss of 20.4 million dollars to the regional economy other reports, like the Mariport Report, estimate a direct local loss between 28 million and 48 million dollars. This economic impact is with respect to just the Saint John-Digby Ferry; the economic impact would probably be greater if the Northumberland Ferry service was included as well. At the expense of potential 50 million dollars annually, elimination of the ferry service would have a negative impact on the Maritimes and the local communities fiscally, environmentally and culturally.

Recommendation

The Federal Government and the Atlantic Provincial Governments recognize the importance and potential of the continuation of the ferry services in the region.