

Market Feasibility Study for the MS *Chi-Cheemaun*

Notes of the Public Consultation Session in Tobermory – 2012-09-27

Tobermory Community Center – 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM

The following is an unedited summary of comments made at the public session. They have been, to the extent possible, organized by key themes. Note that these comments reflect the opinions of individual participants at the public sessions, and as such do not necessarily reflect the analysis, opinions or conclusions of CPCS. These comments will be used in developing the analysis, conclusions and recommendations of the report.

After a brief presentation of the background and objectives of the study, CPCS's Project Manager for the study opens the question and comments period.

General comments

- There are significantly fewer Americans travelling to Canada for vacation purposes and this will not change any time soon (exchange rate + US economy + fuel costs)
- Improved H-69 soon to be 4 lanes up to Sudbury and this is the ferry's primary competitor.
- Consumers are shifting to smaller more efficient cars. This combined with improved highway access to Northern Ontario has created a more cost effective means of travelling north with a minimal penalty in terms of travel time.
- A very large percentage of users are merely using the ferry as an extension of H-6 in order to cross the Island to access the Trans-Canada Highway or parts of Northern Ontario.
- The statistics presented go back about seven years. It would be interesting go back until the mid-90s.
- There has been a significant increase in cottage properties on the Island in recent years. Frequent users such as cottage owners could be much better served to encourage the use of the ferry versus driving around.
- With a 22% decrease in ridership over a 7 year period, it appears that the ferry does not adequately serve regional transportation needs. There should be a greater emphasis on attracting non-tourism users such as commercial trucks and business users.
- Commercial and business users are not being catered to. The last sailing of the day from South Baymouth to Tobermory is a profit killing crossing, fill it with commercial vehicles at a reduced fare to cover fuel and staffing costs.
- There needs to be more of a business mindset at OSTC, from operations to the Board.
- The governance of the board has to be modernised.
- Crew morale must be improved, as it has a huge impact on the travelers. Treat all crew equal, offer incentives, performance appraisals and employee reviews completed on all staff including management.
- There needs to be better communications with GPS and mapping companies so that the ferry option is better known by potential riders.

Marketing

- There is a need for more advertisement including in social media
- Another question is "Does the tourism sector adequately support the ferry, especially on the Manitoulin side"?

- A greater cooperative effort is required between OSTC and Manitoulin as well as Grey Bruce Tourist Association.
- Investigate the potential to establish a contract with trucking companies to utilise the service regularly especially during off peak times.
- It would be interesting to get numbers on the cultural diversity of people taking the ferry and of those who come to Tobermory. Do recent immigrants take the ferry?
- The crew is very good but the marketing is very bad.
- The ferry should be able to compete against the highway. In the end, it's the Georgian Bay competing against asphalt.
- There is no investment in technology or in marketing.
- Signage on the roads is deficient. Need signs to explain why the ferry should be used.
- There is a need to determine what type of advertisement is required and what will be the payback period.
- OSTC should work more with tour operators.
- The dinner cruise has to be better marketed. The menu could be included in the ads.
- There needs to be advertisement in ethnic newspapers.
- Something could be done to develop a package with the Georgian Bay Destination Group. The coastal route around Georgian Bay is very appreciated by overseas tourists
- OSTC has to partner with other tourism operators to attract bus tours.
- Motorcycle groups are good clients and advertisement should be made specifically for them.
- It is important to develop cross-marketing strategies.
- Mennonites love the ferry. Have to find other groups like this to which advertise. Groups to which the ferry can be an enriching experience.
- Have to raise the profile of the cruise experience.
- Have to find the right partners to work with.
- Have to spend more on marketing and on the website.
- There is nothing on the city of Tobermory on the ferry's website, despite requests sent in the past.

Reservation system, costs, fares

- Reintroduction of frequent user incentives
- More discounts to large transportation vehicles if they sail on the 1st and last sailing of the day to free room for more volume during peak trips.
- Rising fares combined with punitive, inconsistent marketing policies has significantly increased the fare price at a time when consumers have become increasingly frugal.
- Historically, reservations were not accepted during the summer on the two busiest trips of the day the very times you need one. After 30 years of service, a fee was applied in order to reserve. This is an added cost which acts as a deterrent to using the service. This fee was amended this season in an inconsistent manner whereby no fee applies to the first trip from Tobermory but still applies to the first trip from South Baymouth... Why?
- A fuel efficient car discount was an ill-conceived program where the same vehicle with a different engine paid a higher fare. This has nothing to do with capacity and space utilisation of the ship.
- Implement an open "no-charge" reservation policy for all sailings. This not only benefits users but also OSTC with advance notice as to capacity utilisation which is beneficial to assisting with the ramp configurations on the ship and staffing both in terms of crew and terminal employees.

- Revise and simplify the fare structure. One should apply for the car and driver, psychologically it looks better to the consumer.
- Implement a fare structure for off peak periods to encourage ridership i.e.: Tuesdays through Thursdays. Weekends are not an issue. BC Ferries have a "Coast Saver" program mid-week. Residents of BC get a discount i.e.: seniors travel free Monday through Thursday.
- The website should facilitate the ability to calculate fares for particular day and crossing. Travelers are on a holiday budget and would like to know in advance how much it costs to use.
- Reinstate the Frequent Sailor program or something similar for regular users (discount card, book of tickets, etc.) See B.C Ferries for examples.
- Make both reservations and ticket purchases available online to speed up and simplify the ticketing process at the terminals. Prepaid ticket holders could merely drive-up and into the parking lot without the need to line-up. Ticket dispensing machines could be used for passenger fares the same as used for municipal parking purposes.
- People do not always understand what they are paying for. The fare system is complicated, and information on the website is confusing and at times misleading.
- There should be electronic signs in Owen Sound and Espanola indicating the status of the ferry and if it is full or not.
- There should be a possibility to pre-pay a book of tickets.
- There is possibility to leverage technology for the ticketing and paying procedures.
- Need debit card capacity at the cafeteria.
- Walk-on fares are too expensive for families.
- It should be possible to buy a round trip ticket, but with the return not on the same day.
- The service fee encourages people to drive around.
- In the past 2-3 years, many families (large often extended families with 2-3 cars) have enquired for information on the ferry and the possibility to go to Manitoulin Island. Yet, they finally decide not to take it because it is too expensive for them.

The experience

- The whole experience of traveling aboard the Chi-Cheemaun needs to reflect a more positive memory than just the extension of the highway, which is dull and boring.
- In general, the ferry is not a user friendly, enjoyable experience to the consumer. Over the years, passengers have and continue to experience the following:
 - Lengthy delays in obtaining passage during peak periods
 - Slow ticketing process
 - Long waits for food in the cafeteria
 - Confusion in finding vehicle when it is time to disembark the ship
 - Inadequate and uncomfortable seating outside the ship
 - Confusing website filled with mistakes or inaccurate information
 - Non adherence to a rigid schedule as the ferry can be 30 minutes behind schedule at the end of the day.
- Get rid of the annoying video arcade games. Families are on vacation and parents are looking to get their kids away from TV video games. Better utilise that area for passenger enjoyment and for business users.
- The ferry has to be a seamless, enjoyable experience.
- There needs to be something to do on the ferry: Commentary, casino, band, movies.

- The ship is short on the living experience. Someone has to provide explanations on the landscape and the environment to passengers. This could be done in the children area or the rear lounge.
- Prepare a colouring book for children.
- The Ambassador program needs to come back.
- The Parks Canada person needs to be onboard more often.
- There needs to be more activities for children. If the kids love their experience, they will ask their parents to come back.
- The captain could make a conference/talk to children.
- There should be a picnic area and bikes to rent on the South Baymouth side.
- Have to get the crew involved and have officers to do tours on the boat.
- Improve outdoor seating on the ship with better deck chairs to enjoy the crossing.
- Advertisement for fine dinner sunset sailings to Flower Pot 4-5 nights per week. Not offered by anyone and could include music, entertainment dancing for more cost. Summer months + Fridays during Spring and Fall.
- Include entertainment in bar area Friday and Saturday nights (summer)
- Provide music, TVs, satellite to play sports games in bar or a movie in lounge.
- Include entertainment from local musicians for passengers.
- The playroom for kids needs upgrade.
- Offer health choice foods (if it costs more, charge more).
- Make wi-fi available to attract business users.
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Schedule and operations

- Would be possible to do off-season charters of the ship.
- Three trips per day from end of June to Labour Day weekend ensuring first and last trips are at a reasonable time.
- A 3rd trip on Sunday nights in the off season to complement the 3rd trip on Fridays for cottage owners.
- Should include sailing around Flower Pot on every crossing except the last from South Baymouth. This is one of the most sought attractions and OSTC is missing out on tourism and revenue.
- Extend sailing season until Christmas. Run one trip a day, leaving Tobermory at 0830 and remaining in South Baymouth until 1430. This would allow commercial vehicles same day service.
- Having the 3rd sailing on Friday nights is beneficial but for anyone in Southern Ontario, it requires leaving early to be in Tobermory at 18:10 sailing.
- Color code or name the car decks to assist riders in locating their vehicle when it is time to depart.
- Cafeteria operations need to be re-worked. It's neither a cafeteria nor a sit down restaurant and it's inefficient. Contract it out to someone in the food services business.
- When you have children running around, you do not want to be waiting an hour before embarking.
- When someone calls to make a reservation, they should not be put on hold when the people taking the reservations are not free. It should be possible to leave a message and have OSCT call back.
- Arriving one hour before departure of the ferry is too early.
- If you pay the whole amount, you should be able to arrive at the last minute.
- The whole ticketing process is too long.
- The washrooms at the terminals have to be opened all night.
- The 7 AM departure is too early for vacationers.

- Maybe there should be three trips per day instead of four.
- The parking lot is a problem. Have to find a way to police it so that cars that do not belong there are removed.
- It should be made crystal clear that riders must arrive one hour early as it creates a lot of frustration when they miss the time.
- Should lower the cut-off time to half an hour. Anyway they start loading half an hour before sailing.