

Citizens group met with

Amherst Island service scrutinized

By Rob Tripp
Whig-Standard Staff Writer

ONTARIO'S TRANSPORTATION MINISTER has ordered an audit of Loyalist Township's Amherst Island ferry operations after months of agitation by concerned islanders.

"It's called a compliance audit ... to ensure that they're in compliance with the service agreement," said Jamie Rilett, director of communications for the minister, Donna Cansfield.



CANSFIELD

The ferry is operated by the township under an agreement with the province, which pays roughly 90 per cent of the annual cost. The township collects

to cover the balance. The agreement provides that the minister can order an audit at any time.

"She asked the ministry officials to invoke that privilege and look at the books," Rilett said in an interview yesterday.

The township announced last year that it might hike fares this year by as much as 30 per cent and impose a \$100 per household tax to cover mounting losses. The announcement sparked outcry from islanders who rely on the service as their lifeline to the mainland.

Rilett said a number of factors contributed to the decision to conduct an audit.

"The municipality was asking for a [funding] increase and then said we don't need it and so the minister said let's just get a complete picture of what's going on," he said.

Rilett said concerns raised by citizens also were a factor. He said a request for proposals from private auditing firms will be released within a few weeks. It is expected to take several months before the audit is completed.

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The minister met privately on the island two weeks ago with five residents, telling them she would order the audit.

The citizens, who formed a lobby group, complain that the service is so well funded by the province that it should not be running a deficit.

The province gave the township roughly \$1.8 million last year. The township says it cost more than \$2 million to operate the ferry, which runs daily between the island and the mainland on an hourly schedule.

Cars must pay \$6 for a round trip. The township is considering hiking the fare to \$8.

The township explained proposed increases this year, saying it feared the operation would run a deficit of more than \$100,000, following a deficit last year of \$80,000.

"The citizens are demanding facts and figures and it's been very hard to get them," said Dick Dodds, a retired school board administrator who lives on the north shore of the island.

He arranged Cansfield's meeting with the citizens group. He hopes the audit will explain how the township has assigned costs.

"I don't think anyone's saying there's been anything illegal or fraudulent done," he said, adding that the audit might show that the township has complied with the agreement.

David Thompson, the township's engineer who is responsible for ferry operations, said the planned \$100 per household charge has been dropped.

"Essentially, we have lowered the budget enough and there was not a lot of public support for it," Thompson said.

Coupled with a proposal to raid \$4,300 from a reserve fund and fare hikes, the township expects it could balance the budget, he said, a dramatic turnaround from early-year projections.

Thompson said changes to the way administrative costs are assigned was a major factor in the revision.

The proposals still need political approval.

Thompson said he places no significance on the decision to conduct an audit.

"They used to do it every year, and they stopped," he said.

The citizens group complains that it is unfair that fewer than 300 households on the island are required to pay for the ferry service, since neighbouring Wolfe Island has free service run by the province.

"What we're really trying to do is have the [Ministry of Transportation] take over the ferry," said Judith Harrower, one of the islanders who met Cansfield earlier this month. "That's really what we would like."

Harrower was forced to file a freedom of information request in order to get detailed ferry budget figures from the township.

Not everyone supports a handoff of ferry operations.

"I much prefer that Loyalist Township operate the ferry rather than

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MTO," said Ian Murray, an island sheep farmer who served 13 years on Amherst Island council and was reeve for three years. "The farther up the food chain you get in politics ... the less efficiency I believe you have."

He believes the island now has superior ferry service.

Murray also doesn't want to see fees eliminated if the province takes over, worrying that would bring more traffic to the island and congestion on the ferry.

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