

Ministry of Transportation to take ownership of Amherst Island service docks

By Kristen Coughlar

Loyalist Township's 11-year quest to have the Ministry of Transportation assume ownership of the service docks for the Amherst Island ferry has come to an end.

Last week the province announced that it would take over ownership of the township-owned docks at Stella and Millhaven.

"Loyalist Township has been requesting the MTO to take over ownership of the ferry docks for quite some time. As part of this year's budget, the ministry requested funding to be able to assume ownership. The assumption of the docks by the ministry was approved as part of the 2009-2010 budget," said MTO spokesperson Brandy Duhaime in an email interview. "Taking ownership of the docks will enhance the province's commitment to the ferry services and will allow the province

to work more effectively with the municipality in ensuring efficiency of the service."

Duncan Ashley, the Amherst Island representative on Loyalist Township council, said the municipality didn't do anything different recently that made the province change its mind.

"It wasn't like we finally tricked them into doing something. And, it sure wasn't just this council...begging hard enough that we finally got it. I think everything just finally fell into place."

Currently, the Amherst Island ferry loads by the side. After assuming ownership, the province will now look at upgrading the ferry docks to allow for end-loading ferry service.

Ashley said he believes a multitude of factors contributed to the province's decision to take over ownership of the Amherst Island

service docks. He said that end-loading docks reduce the amount of fuel required to dock the ferry. Making the ferry service more environmentally friendly would open up the possibility of

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receiving federal funding, Ashley said.

"I personally think it was a perfect storm," the councillor said.

Ashley said the eventual conversion of the docks to allow for end-loading will mean a more efficient ferry service for Amherst Island.

"It would definitely leave the potential for quicker turn over," he said.

Ashley noted that par-

ticularly in the summer, there are an increased number of people traveling to the island who are unfamiliar with the ferry. During the peak periods, it can take longer to load and unload the

transported to the island. He said the existing conditions hinder the transport of some large farm implements and construction equipment. He noted that even school buses just barely fit on the vessel.

"Anything of any kind of size that people just take for granted we can't get over there. Who knows how many development ideas or even people who have looked at buying cheap farmland and have said, 'well this is great but if I can't get the size of combine I want over there forget it.' It's hard to gauge how many things we've probably lost in the last 40 years," he said.

For all these reasons, Ashley said that the news of this announcement has been relatively well-received by island residents.

"(The response has been) very positive. Very positive, but reserved by some. A lot of people still say, 'well

this is a good first step.' Because when this gets finished, when we have end-loading docks and the amount of fuel that we burn goes down and the fuel costs go down, that might offer us some flexibility in the portion that we are charging to cover, but it's not going to mean a free ride to Amherst Island. And, a lot of people still don't like looking at Wolfe Island and Glenora; they've already got those docks and they still don't pay."

Negotiations for the transfer of the docks to the province have yet to take place, but Duncan expects the changeover will take place in the immediate future.

"I think it can take place definitely before the end of the year. And, my understanding from the ministry's staff is that they want to get the transfer done and get going on the environmental assessment and examine all the options."