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Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2025

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 Issue 50
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PHOTO BY ROB LOWRIE

BRIGHT NIGHT: A decorated Johnson's Automotive Services truck carrying "The Grinch" and other staff and family members thrills spectators at the first Trucker n' Trade Holiday Parade held Saturday, Dec. 6. More than 50 vehicles participated in the event, which also raised over \$5,900 for the Canadian Cancer Society in honour of Rick Andrews, the excavating company owner who passed away this past summer. See more photos on Page 6 and at gulfislandsdriftwood.com.

EMERGENCY SERVICES

Fire hall set for May 3 opening

Flexibility, efficiency show up in building details on tour

BY ROBB MAGLEY
 DRIFTWOOD STAFF

"I mean, right now we wash our hoses out in the parking lot."

Salt Spring Island Fire Rescue (SSIFR) Chief Jamie Holmes was leading district trustees past an unassuming square hole, where he explained a modern hose washing system will soon be installed. Built into the side of the future hose tower at his department's nearly complete new Fire Hall No. 1, it's among several remarkable details highlighted during a tour for the fire board held Saturday, Dec. 6.

Holmes explained the washer can pressure-clean a fire hose immediately after firefighters return from a call, pulling it directly off the truck and through that small hole — after which a hoist raises lengths of hose straight up into the tower to dry. It's the sort of thoughtful feature found throughout the new hall,

extending the service life of valuable equipment and multiplying the efficiency of the structure.

Like a lot of things here, the hose tower isn't just for hoses.

"There's anchors all the way up, so we can rappel off the side, and we have openings on the front to practise laddering," said Holmes. "Everything we could think of, if we could find room in the budget to 'future-proof' something, we took the opportunity."

The large central bay is being built with double doors at either end, potentially allowing four vehicles at a time to sit in a nose-out, ready-to-go configuration. Instead of attaching a ducting hose to each fire truck's exhaust pipe, the climate-controlled and lightly pressurized space has central air scrubbers, allowing speedy flexibility if trucks need to be rearranged.

The building reclaims waste heat from almost every process, to either warm the truck bay or help dry firefighters' gear between calls. There's a workshop space — think small engine repair and maintenance for things like chainsaws — well-removed from a clean room where breathing apparatus and personal safety equipment can be carefully decontaminated and maintained.

The entire east side of the building was constructed to make future expansion in that direction easier, and the west side — where rainfall from a fire-engine-sized attached "carport" is directed into 30,000 gallons of underground water storage — can be "walled in" relatively quickly and at comparatively little expense, should the department find itself needing more indoor vehicle space.

FIRE HALL continued on 2

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HOUSING

More rental units possible

Principal residence requirement in effect

BY ROBB MAGLEY
DRIFTWOOD STAFF

Caveats abound, but rough estimates suggest a dozen or more Salt Spring Island short-term rental (STR) units could transform into long-term housing next year, if the island's experience opting into B.C.'s principal residency requirement is anything like Bowen Island's.

This summer, Salt Spring's Local Trust Committee joined Bowen and Gabriola islands in opting into that part of the provincial Short-Term Rental Accommodations Act (STRAA), effective Nov. 1. Bowen's council made its decision last year.

During the Islands Trust Council's meeting Wednesday, Dec. 3, planning services director Stefan Cermak told trustees that his colleagues on Bowen Island estimated about six short-term rentals had ceased operations due to the new requirements, and several other operators had "restructured" their business — including at least one who shifted into having a long-term tenant on the property.

"Bowen does not check what happens to all the units that close, so they can't confirm how many have been converted to long-term rental units," said Cermak. "They don't know if they're left vacant or sold. But they anecdotally knew of one."

Bowen Island's most recent municipal report noted 136 licensed STRs — 58 bed and breakfast operations, already requiring operators to reside on-site, and 78 other residential guest accommodations. In September, Islands Trust bylaw compliance and enforcement manager Warren Dingman reported Salt Spring had 226 properties registered with the new provincial system.

At the same rate, that would translate to between three and 17 "new" long-term housing units potentially coming available on Salt Spring — although with just 176 names reportedly associated with those 226 rentals, more still may be considered unlawful under the new require-

ment and could consider switching.

Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs housing policy branch director Hannah Rabinovitch has been the policy lead for STRAA since its inception, and led development of the act's regulations. Rabinovitch clarified for trustees on Wednesday that bed and breakfast operations fall squarely within the province's STR category — and those businesses must also be in compliance, regardless of their Islands Trust-permitted land use.

"On Salt Spring it will be the first year where all hosts will be asked to provide principal residence documentation," said Rabinovitch. "And the [provincial] registry team will be reviewing it."

Since May 2024, all short term rental hosts in B.C. have been required to register with the province, and since last June all listings on online platforms have been validated. Rabinovitch explained that work is done by the listing agencies themselves — such as Airbnb.com, VRBO.com or booking.com — as they are now required by regulators to verify each listing matches with a person in the provincial registry.

"This has meant that as of June of last year, if you've booked a short-term rental online in B.C., you've booked with a registered operator," said Rabinovitch.

The new-to-Salt-Spring principal residence requirement limits STRs to the host's principal residence — defined as the usual place where someone makes their home, with a recent amendment in the legislature adding one secondary suite, accessory dwelling unit or laneway home on the same property.

That requirement is a "floor," Rabinovitch said — meaning local governments can choose to have more restrictive bylaws. She confirmed that information from the provincial portal is shared with local governments, including the Islands Trust — giving officials access to host contact information, STR property addresses and booking data, such as how frequently hosts are renting particular properties.

Dingman said Islands Trust bylaw officers have had access to the portal for roughly six months, and that despite a bit

of a "data lag" with registry updates, it had been a useful tool.

"It allows us to verify if there are resident owners on the property," said Dingman. "So if these listings are not complying with the home business requirements already in almost all our land use bylaws, we can forward a list to the registry."

Notably, in communities that require business licensing, local governments can directly request platforms to remove listings that don't submit proof of having one. That process has resulted in the removal of almost 2,000 noncompliant listings across B.C., according to Rabinovitch. But that tool does not apply to violations of other local regulations, such as those involving a land use bylaw or temporary use permit. Those cases currently require a manual review at the provincial level.

None of the Southern Gulf Islands currently have business licensing schemes in place. If implemented, licensing would come under a regional district authority, not the Islands Trust.

Notably, STRAA does not apply to hotels, motels or hostels, Rabinovitch said, nor some farmland, tents, temporary shelters, vehicles or RVs. But, she added, it is the provincial STR registry team that's responsible for assessing such exemptions, not operators themselves — and not the Islands Trust.

The province monitors these listings for signs of those exemptions being misused, according to Rabinovitch, via monthly reporting from the online platforms.

Provincial regulators can also choose to act on complaints from local governments and the public about hosts that they believe are violating local bylaws — such as a single host operating multiple short-term rentals in a principal residence region — and investigations by B.C.'s compliance and enforcement team are prioritized based on the severity of the contravention.

Dingman said while some Bowen Island operators had been the subject of complaints, none had resulted in investigations. On Gabriola Island, according to Dingman, no such complaints had been registered.

EMERGENCY SERVICES

Chief: no waste of space in hall



PHOTO BY ROBB MAGLEY

Fire Chief Jamie Holmes, right, leads district trustees on a tour of the new fire hall.

FIRE HALL

continued from 1

Every nook and cranny has at least one purpose, and usually several, Holmes said; from under-stair storage spaces to flexible meeting rooms that can be configured into different sizes — or repurposed in an instant into an extension of the building's emergency operations centre, supporting multiple agencies in a disaster.

Holmes said amongst the fire-resistant xeriscape planned for near the building — and inside a perimeter "fooscape" along the fences he said will include berry patches — they're pouring a small RV pad, perfect for visiting training or maintenance contractors from off-island, or even staff.

"In the future we believe housing will continue to be an issue," said Holmes. "So worst-case scenario, maybe somebody coming into a job here could at least park an RV in the back and have somewhere to lay their head while they were trying to find secure housing."

The new hall is expected to be fully operational by an official opening on May 3.

BC FERRIES

Terminal work, 2-ship service at Vesuvius ahead

Shifting of lower-cost tickets adds confusion

BY GAIL SJUBERG AND ROBB MAGLEY
DRIFTWOOD STAFF

Long-awaited terminal improvement work will affect Gulf Islands ferry travel this winter, but BC Ferries (BCF) said it aims to minimize impacts and give plenty of notice of schedule changes and berth closure times.

Work to upgrade the vehicle ramp, marine structures and the electrical distribution system at Otter Bay on Pender Island has already begun, with an end-of-March 2026 completion date, according to a Nov. 26 BCF service notice. A five-day terminal closure from March 6 to 10 will be required, with water taxi service between Otter and Swartz bays and free parking at both ends set up for that period.

Work scheduled for Berth 1 at Village Bay on Mayne Island will see it closed for eight weeks from Jan. 5 to March 1, but Berth 2 still available. A 16-week construction period is planned, with work expected to wrap up

by the end of April 2026.

Revised schedules, with changes described as "minor" and designed to reduce congestion at other berths, will be posted once available.

Of more immediate concern for people travelling to and from Salt Spring via Fulford Harbour this weekend is cancellation of the last two sailings of the Skeena Queen on Saturday, Dec. 13 as the vessel undergoes repairs. The 5:50 p.m. departure from Fulford Harbour and the 7 p.m. from Swartz Bay will be the last sailings of the day. The 6:15 a.m. sailing departing Fulford and the 9 a.m. from Swartz Bay on Sunday are also at risk of cancellation. Water taxi service is in place for foot passengers on those sailings.

Meanwhile, a Dec. 2 open house event at the Harbour House Hotel brought people up to speed on planned work to both the Crofton and Vesuvius Bay terminals, for eventual two-ship service on the route beginning in the summer of 2027.

BCF staff attending that session said service between Crofton and Vesuvius will be unavailable on some days as a result of the work, but plenty of notice — ideally two

weeks — would be given in advance. At this point, construction to create a lay-by berth at Crofton for the second ferry is scheduled to occur in the spring and summer of 2026, and upgrades to the existing Vesuvius and Crofton trestles and berths will run from the fall of 2026 through early 2027.

BCF advises that the best way to stay informed about the terminal projects and any closures/schedule changes is to subscribe to the appropriate project pages on the BCF website: bcferriesprojects.ca. Email messages will be sent to all subscribers.

In other BCF news, Gulf Islands travellers going to or from Tsawwassen via Swartz Bay may have noticed a change in thru fare rates and longstanding policy that took effect without much notice on Oct. 15.

For the past 10 years, passengers who requested the thru fare option have paid the same price as if travelling directly between Tsawwassen and the Gulf Islands (Route 9). That is no longer the case.

Ferry officials said a combination of increased and shifting demand for sailings and an effort to deter an arcane bit of fare cheating were behind the changes.

"Thru fare travel is available when customers book a prepaid fare to Swartz Bay and request the thru fare at the Tsawwassen ticket booth," said BCF senior communications advisor Sheila Reynolds. "No extra charges apply. Customers with a 'reservation-only' booking or travelling without a booking will pay at-terminal rate."

"The at-terminal rate for Route 1 (Tsawwassen-Swartz Bay), Route 9 (Tsawwassen-Southern Gulf Islands), and the at-terminal thru fare are now aligned at \$95. This prevents situations where customers travelling only to Swartz Bay could use the thru fare to pay less than the standard Route 1 at-terminal rate," she said, adding that travelling thru fare from Tsawwassen-Swartz Bay-Fulford on the prepaid fare is \$105, while travelling prebooked and prepaid off-peak from Tsawwassen to Long Harbour is \$80.

"We know this is an adjustment for some travellers, but booking ahead helps ensure travel certainty and reduces the long road lineups and terminal congestion that have become more common as demand grows."

She said fare changes were outlined in a fare guide posted online April 1.