

Marine Highway Cuts Programs to Tighten Belt

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Say so long to summer drivers riding the ferry for free. Wave goodbye to the winter roundtrip discount. And printed schedules? Those are on their way out too.

Those changes won't happen for a while. But they are just some of the ways the Alaska Marine Highway will address a \$3.5-million spending cut mandated by the Legislature.

Ferry Business Enterprise Director Dick Leary described the cuts at Tuesday's Marine Transportation Advisory Board meeting. He said managers won't cut sailings where tickets have already been sold. That means no reductions to the summer schedule that runs through September.

"We also feel very strongly that the winter schedule as it now exists is a bare-bottom service level and so if possible, we don't want to cut any of the winter schedule. And that takes us from October first to April 30th. So, of course, you put one and two together and you've only got May and June left.

Managers also agreed that none of the system's 35 port communities should lose service for an extended amount of time.

But there will be some cuts. The Taku will not operate on its Prince Rupert-to-Juneau run in June of 2014. That reduces sailings to Ketchikan, Wrangell, Petersburg, Kake and Sitka. Another ship, the Malaspina, will continue to offer that service.

The Juneau-based fast ferry Fairweather will sail less often during the first two weeks of next May. That will affect Sitka and Lynn Canal routes.

Advisory board member Gerry Hope of Sitka said that hurts his hometown.

"It seems like we're a frequent visitor to your cut-budget system. I want to support you; I want to back you up. But it feels at this point that I can't get fully on board, no pun intended."

Business Director Leary said other cuts were chosen to avoid further service reductions. The roundtrip discounts will go away this

fall. The drivers-ride-free program will end at the same time.

Board Chairman Robert Venables (VEN-ah-bulls) said the marine highway should prepare for further reductions.

"It was obvious that the Legislature's squeezing all area of the state budget and that's going to be a trend that's going to continue for the foreseeable future. This year's cuts were probably more of a nick than an amputation.)

Officials said they would consider raising ticket prices and retiring ferries if further cuts come in future years.