



**OWEN SOUND  
TRANSPORTATION CO.**

## **Message from the President & CEO on OSTC ferry reservations telephone wait times**

July 22, 2020

Thank you to all ferry customers who have been patient while waiting to get through on the telephone to make ferry reservations. We know you are making summer vacation travel plans and it is frustrating having to wait for extended periods in the answering que. But please do not forget – OSTC staff are also working under Covid-19 mitigation measures, on the ferry, on terminal sites, and in the administration office where the reservations department resides.

OSTC is only able to operate the ferry if we do so in accordance with [Transport Canada Interim Order No 2](#) for ferries. This Interim Order requires the ferry service to ensure there is space for physical distancing on the vessel, conduct in-person health screening at the time of purchasing the ferry boarding pass, and employ other mitigation measures that reduce risk and contact between passengers, and passengers and crew.

The most significant impact Interim Order No 2 has on the Chi-Cheemaun ferry is the physical distancing requirement which has reduced the passenger capacity from 638 to 200 per trip. OSTC is unable to manage the passenger cap if we leave ferry reservation access online. We have had to revert to taking reservations over the telephone for this purpose, and to ensure passengers are aware of the required Covid-19 mitigation instructions so that no passenger arrives at the ferry uninformed.

Why can't we leave reservations online for customer access? That is a fair question. OSTC's 30-year-old ferry reservation system that allowed customers to book vehicles online prior to Covid was in the process of being replaced with a new system when the pandemic forced businesses to lock-down. A competition for the new system was held in 2019 and the work was awarded for 2020 implementation. Work had begun in January on a 6-month project to replace the system. The provider was in the first stage of system set-up and configuration when the pandemic curtailed all international travel. The project had progressed as far as it could without human on-site intervention and is now on hold until unrestricted travel is restored.

Our existing 30-year-old system was purpose-built to account for vehicle size only, not the number of passengers per trip. It cannot be reconfigured to begin calculating capacity by passenger number and continue to collect and calculate vehicle deck space available. OSTC had been searching for an appropriate replacement system for several years, but prior to 2019 affordable software and technology development had not caught up to meet the specific needs of the ferry service, not the least of which was a seamless customer-controlled reservation experience.

The new system will provide online reservations for both vehicles and passengers, allow customers to set up and manage their own accounts, provide opportunities for departure specific discounted prices, and send information emails should the customer register for the service. The new reservations system will also allow customers to pre-pay for their reservation and reduce advance wait time on arrival at the ferry terminal.

Until the new system is in place, for the duration of the pandemic, and while Transport Canada's Interim Order No 2 continues to limit total passenger capacity on ferries, OSTC will continue to take all reservations via telephone.

We are currently accommodating the maximum number of reservation agents in the building that proper physical distancing permits. Reservation Agents are working on telephones and cannot wear face masks.

Customers have asked why we are not hiring additional reservation agents and having them take ferry reservations from their homes. This is not a viable option as OSTC would be in violation of our legal responsibility to protect the personal and credit card information of our customers. We do not have a VPN that can be managed outside of this building. Could we have set one up? That is the wrong question – the question is “should” we have? And the answer is a clear “no”. Large corporations who are working remotely through substantial VPNs are being hacked. It is not hard. We are certain our customers do not want to wait in a different telephone que cancelling their credit cards and having new ones issued because we could not protect that information in order to make the ferry reservation process “easier” during the pandemic.

Why can't we let the Tobermory terminal and South Baymouth terminal also take reservations? The terminals are not connected to the 800 line which is the only telephone number through which we can properly manage the caller que, provide first-come, first-served service, and ensure we are not overbooking. But the main reason is that the terminal staff are all fully occupied with their terminal duties, checking in customers, performing the individual health check per the Transport Canada Interim Order, managing the access of ferry customers to terminal washroom facilities, and increased cleaning frequency of same. The terminal staff do not have time to also be taking reservation calls.

Call completion times are longer during a pandemic as we must ensure a good deal of information is provided to the customer to ensure they are informed before arriving at the ferry dock. We collect more information as well to ensure we have complete contact information if Public Health notifies us that a Covid positive patient may have used the ferry service.

We take every opportunity to provide customers with access to necessary information beginning with the website, repeated at the point of making the reservation, repeated again with the email reservation confirmation, repeated yet again at the ferry ticket booth check-in, and finally again when on board. Yet still we have customers who do not wish to follow, or do not like the rules, insist they were “never told”. We assure you that is not the case.

In addition to making your ferry reservation, here is the information we review with every customer:

- Passengers who have traveled outside of the country in 14-day period prior to departure will not be allowed to board.
- The requirement to bring and wear a face mask (certain exemptions apply but mask exempt passengers will be assigned a position from which they cannot move out of for duration of crossing).
- The requirement to pass a health check at time the boarding pass is issued.
- Notification that there is no food service on the ship; food may not be brought on board for consumption (medical exceptions only). Water is permitted. Absolutely NO alcohol.

- The requirement to confirm the EXACT number of passengers at time of reservation (no additional passengers may be added without a reservation). ALL free children must also have a reservation.
- The requirement to arrive one hour in advance of scheduled departure time to be screened and checked in.

In spite of this extensive exchange of information, we continue to have passengers arrive at the ferry terminal “uninformed” expecting to be admitted on the ferry with no reservation, late for a reservation, or in defiance of the Covid-19 mitigation requirements including mandatory masks and on-site health check questions. As a result, ticket agents at the terminals lose precious time explaining to those customers why they will not be able to board the ferry, and why they are being turned away. We have done our part to provide the information. Unless we have made a mistake, we cannot accommodate uninformed passengers even though the ferry is “only one-third full” (100% full under the Covid rules).

Once you connect on our telephone line, you will hear a recorded message. Please listen to the message and if the information you are seeking is provided there or on the website, please hang up. If you are calling to make a reservation you will be told what number you are in the que (we can que up to 70 persons at one time), and how long the approximate wait time for an agent will be.

Many customers are using telephone que wait time to also send us an email with their reservation request. **This is not helpful.** If you have made an email request, please do not continue to wait on the telephone line. We will respond to the email. But please note we are unable to respond to emailed reservation requests for same day, next day, or even the next 2-3 days. For those reservations you have no option other than to remain in the telephone que.

We have done everything our physical resources permit to reduce telephone wait times. We have found that the customers can also help us reduce overall telephone wait times by changing some caller behaviours. Below is some advice for customers to consider before calling for a ferry reservation. Minor changes in customer behaviour will improve wait times as they can reduce call volume by up to 25%:

1. Call only once. Plan your trip BEFORE contacting us. Know the vehicle size, the time and date of your preferred sailing and the EXACT number of passengers travelling (including children). Have your credit card with you so that you do not have to go searching for it when making the reservation. Have an alternate sailing date and time selected if your first choice is not available. Refrain from making repeated calls.
2. READ your email confirmation. If there is an error, please email us immediately. If you have just changed your mind and wish to change your travel plans, please cancel that reservation (you can do it by email so that we have a date & time stamp which will help you avoid unnecessary cancellation charges), but you will need to call to make a new reservation.
3. Read the website – answers to most common questions are there, as is departure availability – this is updated 3 times daily and provides instant insight unlike calling in to inquire about availability in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour.
4. Do not expect to be able to make a same day reservation, or for the following day. Very often we are full given the reduced passenger capacity and last-minute reservation attempts may

result in telephone que wait-time frustration only to find the reservation space is not available. Plan your travel as far ahead as you can and book your sailings accordingly.

5. If you have sent us an email, you will have received an autoreply stating next steps for booking and expected time frame in receiving a response. We are receiving several hundred more emails a day than we can physically process. Emails are being triaged and may not be responded to on a first-come, first-served basis. If you wish to make a reservation within the coming week, you are better served to wait in the phone que.
6. Social media: We do not conduct business over social media. Please do not expect a response to a reservation request via social media. You must call 1-800-265-3163.
7. Be patient and be kind. Operating through a pandemic is no easier on us than it is on the customers waiting in the telephone que. Our telephone reservation agents are working long hours and are doing their very best to accommodate all callers. Please remember the first rule of civility and speak to others the same way you expect people to be respectful and polite in speaking to you.

All of us at OSTC will continue to do everything we can to reduce telephone wait times and provide a safe transportation service on the ferry during this pandemic. We appreciate all our customers who are working with us in this effort and who recognize we are all in the pandemic together.

We look forward to the day when we can return to offering all the on-board entertainment and amenities that showcase everything good Ontario has to offer.

Stay safe and stay healthy,

Susan Schrempf  
President and CEO