



Back to Crowds overwhelm single Toronto Island ferry

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Jennifer Yang

In his 29 years of ferrying people to Toronto Island, boat crew member Frank Corbin never saw passengers as agitated as they were this weekend.

There was pushing, profanity and even punches thrown; at one point on Friday, the police had to be called in to help regulate the crowd.

Just blame it on the potent combination of unseasonably warm weather, a holiday weekend and thousands of Torontonians trying to get to Toronto Island.

That, and the fact that just one puny, puttering ferry was available to haul everyone across.

"It was very busy, much busier than normal," said Corbin, the first mate of Ongiara, the 220-passenger ferry. "We were not really prepared for the crowd, basically."

Lineups at the ferry docks stretched past the ticket gates as people waited for up to three hours before leaving dry land.

People became so frustrated they were rushing onto the boat or jumping queues.

At least one fist fight broke out Friday, Corbin said.

"(People were) very impatient," he said. "Rude to me, rude to the captain. They were swearing at the deckhand, calling him a lazy bum and using the f-word."

But many were angry at having to wait hours for a boat when several larger ones were sitting nearby.

"I wonder how long it takes to get a boat ready for water?" said Emma Ditchburn of Hamilton. "The city knew the weather was going to be brilliant and that meant more people going across (to the island). Why not get the other boats ready?"

Yona Joo, a Korean student learning English in Toronto, and her friends waited two hours Saturday afternoon before reaching the front of the line. Even then, they weren't able to make the next ferry.

"Why is there only one (boat) in use ... why not these?" she asked, pointing to three others docked metres away.

"It's so unfair," she said. "I won't be able to go (back to the island) again and I'm leaving for Korea soon."

Ongiara is still running on its winter schedule, which means one trip every hour, but because of the crowds, crew members were running the boats every half-hour. It takes roughly 15 minutes to get to the islands, with a round trip taking 30 minutes.

For crew members, this meant working straight through their eight-hour shifts. Captain Tom Millard said he empathized with the passengers but there was little he or his crew members could do.

"It's understandable they're annoyed. However, we can't make the boat bigger," he said. "As front-line service providers, we are not responsible for the decisions made by management."

Some employees working the docks said it was possible to have one of the bigger boats running this weekend but management never made the



The packed 220-passenger Ongiara, the sole ferry operating on the weekend, makes its way back from Ward's Island April 3, 2010.

TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

call.

But according to James Dann, manager of waterfront parks for the city, there is little flexibility to change operations on short notice.

Ferry schedules are drawn up six months in advance and, at that point, "you are not expecting the first week of April to be so beautiful and sunny."

"Our boats are yet to be certified by Transport Canada and the bulk of our staff recall will be in the next two weeks," Dann said. "We have some full-time staff but most of our staff is seasonal."

Referring to Friday night's incident on the Ward's Island dock when police were called, he said passengers usually don't get unruly.

"I guess when the weather turned (cooler), there was a crush of people wanting to go back home," he said. "There were some people who jumped ahead in line and there was chaos."