

The Short History of the Rochester Fast Ferry.

By

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The Short History of the Rochester Fast Ferry

In 1998 Mayor Bill Johnson and the Rochester Common Council proposed a ferry running between Rochester and Toronto. Mayor Johnson knew that he would need support from various other government leaders. That proved to be difficult and would take a few years.

In February 1999, the Mayor is quoted as saying "This is an exciting opportunity for the City of Rochester..." "Roughly 41 million Canadians visit the United States each year. We want to make sure that Rochester will be an easy, accessible and exciting business and tourist destination that more Canadian citizens will take advantage of. The Fast Ferry will enable this to happen."



In 2000 the City Council issued a request for proposals to run the Port and two ferries from 39 prospective operators. Only four companies replied with their qualifications and interest. From this the City asked two companies to submit written proposals. Only Canadian American Transportation Systems (CATS) responded and the City decided to proceed.



In late June 2001 CATS updated their budget and announced that they would only be purchasing one ferry for \$42.5 million from Austal in Australia. In the meantime, in July 2001, Congress approved \$3.5 million in funding to help build a new ferry terminal in the Port of Rochester. Then in September City Council approved a lease with CATS to run the Port building.

Work began to get money to start up the ferry. A large amount of the money was to come from Australian lenders. Other loans were from Daimler-Chrysler (the engine builder) and from the Rochester Urban Renewal Agency. On May 15, 2002 the State Legislature gives \$10 million for Fast Ferry.

The Rochester Terminal started taking shape (picture to right) but there was some trouble getting approval from the Toronto Port Authority. It wasn't until August of 2003 that CATS reached an agreement with the Toronto Port Authority about a place to



put the terminal in Toronto.



In this picture, the ferry is almost complete at Austal's facility. It is dated Oct. 3, 2003. Also in October CATS began accepting applications for 100 planned jobs both on the ship and in the terminal.

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Then it happened.... A newspaper article appeared in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* dated Nov. 29, 2003 by reporter Jan Wong. She didn't paint a very nice picture of Rochester and couldn't figure why anyone would ever want to go from Toronto to Rochester. Mayor Johnson was not pleased and wrote that Rochester was not as bad as Ms. Wong made out. Below is the entire newspaper article.



Ferry Bad Place

The good news is that Torontonians are getting an exciting new car ferry. The bad news is it's going to Rochester

By JAN WONG

Toronto Globe & Mail

Saturday, November 29, 2003

ROCHESTER, N.Y.

People in this beleaguered city on the south shore of Lake Ontario are pretty excited about a new Toronto-Rochester car ferry promised for May. For their part, people in Toronto have barely noticed. That's all to the good because there are several important reasons why Torontonians wouldn't ever want to come here.

Take Rochester's homicide rate, at triple the U.S. average. The car-theft rate is 2.6 times the U.S. average. Robbery is nearly triple the national rate. Then there's the culinary treasure known – this is true – as the Garbage Plate.

For \$6 (U.S.), you get home fries and cold macaroni salad, topped with a cheeseburger or hot dog, all drowned in ground meat, hot sauce, chopped raw onions and Day-Glo orange grease. It takes a tattooed cook 14 seconds to assemble. It looks unpicturesque.

"That's why they call it the Garbage Plate," says Mayor William A. Johnson Jr., 61, who is no fan.

Don't sample it at Nick Tahou Hots (slogan: "Home of the Garbage Plate"). At this fluorescent-and-Formica joint, the cheeseburger is as dry as a cracker and the grease pools at the bottom of the paper plate.

"It's supposed to be greasy," says the skinny cashier, who appears to eat elsewhere. Nick's used to be open all night until it hosted one too many shootouts. Located on West Main Street, it's a quick but perilous walk from the mayor's office, past a homeless shelter, shuttered businesses and a high school for troubled youths.

"You walked there?" Mr. Johnson says. "I wouldn't walk there. Don't go there again. If you had made a wrong turn, you would have been in no man's land." He pulls out sheets of statistics. Rochester's homicide rate, at 17.4 per 100,000, is double New York City's.

In 2001, Rochester had 39 homicides, mostly execution-style hits.

"Only a couple of times a year, a purely innocent person gets shot," the mayor says. He dreamed up the ferry idea in 1995, a year after he took office. He thought tourism might halt the city's decline. Conjuring up a vision of Torontonians streaming across Lake Ontario, he persuaded New York state to kick in \$14-million toward a ferry service.

Currently, the \$42.5-million (U.S.) high-speed catamaran is out of dry dock in Perth, Australia. At the Rochester harbour, a 30-minute drive from downtown, work crews are rushing to convert an abandoned warehouse into a terminal.

But neither side has received approval from customs and immigration authorities. And construction hasn't even begun in Toronto. "I'm in the dark as to exactly what kind of structure they're talking about," says Mr. Johnson, who has heard rumours that Toronto's terminal might be a concrete pad covered by a tent.

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Henry Pankratz, Toronto Port Authority chairman, didn't return calls. Nor did Dominick DeLucia or Howard Thomas, executives at the ferry company, Canadian American Transportation Systems.

"The last I heard they wanted somebody else to put in money," says Joe Pantalone, a Toronto city councilor who chairs the municipal waterfront group.

In a sign of how few tourists come to Rochester, rooms at Microtel Inn & Suites cost \$39.95.

"I get the stupidest calls from the stupidest people," the desk clerk complained to a room attendant the other morning. "Like, 'How big are your rooms?'" In fact, Microtel has queen beds and full baths, and includes continental breakfast, free local calls, cable TV and the morning paper.

Rochester would be a bargain, except that Air Canada charges nearly \$900 round-trip for a 25-minute flight. (Advance bookings are \$387, with a \$150 penalty for any change.) By car, the trip via Buffalo takes about 3½ hours, plus gas and tolls. In contrast, the thrice-daily ferry will cost \$40 (U.S.) per car, plus \$20 per passenger, or \$28 for walk-ons. Shore to shore, the trip takes 2½ hours, an estimate that doesn't include customs and immigration checks.

But such comparisons miss the point, according to Carol Miller, a retired hospital worker (and my cousin-in-law), who has lived in Rochester her whole life. "What do they expect people from Toronto to do when they come here? There is so nothing here."

Hers is a typical Rochesterian psyche, less civic boosterism than civic dumpsterism. Indeed, last June a number of local organizations offered a "Reality Tour" of the city's poorest neighbourhoods.

Ms. Miller offers her own blightseeing tour. At the ferry docks, she points out abandoned buildings. "The beach is polluted," she says over the roar of front-loaders. Later, she drives her family van over potholed streets to the downtown core. Here, on the Genesee River, is Rochester's star attraction: a 30-metre waterfall.

High Falls is no Niagara Falls, but it did power

Rochester's first flour mills. On this sunny November day, the footbridge is deserted. "I hate to tell you this, but it's like this in the summer, too," Ms. Miller says. "To be honest, I wouldn't come here day or night alone."

Downtown, all-day parking is \$3. A nearby heritage building is vacant, with smashed windows and torn plastic sheeting. Traffic is so sparse it's unnecessary to look left or right when crossing the street. But pretensions to a bygone era remain: no-left-turn signs on every downtown corner.

Two hundred years ago, High Falls made Rochester the largest flour-milling city in the world. A hundred years ago, George Eastman invented the 10-cent flexible film roll and the \$1 Brownie camera here. His 50-room mansion, which now houses a museum of photography, is the city's only five-star attraction. In 1932, at the age of 77, the lifelong bachelor declared his life's work done and shot himself in an upstairs bedroom.

Rochester's decline can be traced to governor Thomas E. Dewey. In 1948, Rochester voted against him when he ran for president, ensuring he lost the state—and the White House. Two years later, Mr. Dewey saw to it that Interstate 90 bypassed Rochester on its way from Buffalo to Syracuse.

Today, digital technology has slashed employment at Eastman Kodak Co. to 21,000 from a high of 60,000 in 1982. Two other main employers, Xerox Corp. and Bausch & Lomb Inc., have also cut jobs. In the past decade, Rochester's population has shrunk 6.3 per cent to 220,000 (Greater Rochester has about a million) and taxable city property values have plunged 15.3 per cent. It now ranks 173rd among the nation's 200 largest metropolitan areas in terms of job creation and economic performance.

At the end of a depressing tour, Ms. Miller is pressed for a genuine Rochester attraction. She suggests Wegmans, a supermarket. Don't laugh. "It's the store where I take my relatives and out-of-town visitors," Neil Stern, a food-industry analyst, told *The New York Times*. Cher went there this summer. Wearing dark glasses and a cowboy hat, she signed autographs and cooed to the manager, Bill Congdon,

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"I'd love for you to build one of these stores in Malibu where I live."

At 130,000 square feet, the Pittsford Plaza Wegmans offers a caviar bar, a kosher deli that authentically boils the bagels before baking, and a less authentic Chinese buffet. The fish department cooks to order, free. The flower department has a five-day guarantee on roses. You can hook your latte cup onto your shopping cart. Your toddler can "drive" a red plastic car also hooked, yes, to your shopping cart.

Aside from gargantuan restaurant portions – the Scotch N Sirloin offers 48-ounce slabs of prime rib, Nick Tahou Hots sells 42-ounce drinks – everything in Rochester seems to be disappearing. Downtown's revolving restaurant has closed. The nightly laser show at High Falls has been mostly discontinued. Even the Red Wings baseball team had five consecutive losing seasons, including, in 2002, its

worst in 23 years.

"Then they moved the team to Ottawa, and immediately it got better," says Mr. Johnson, who himself was trounced this month in a race for county manager.

Not surprisingly, Rochesterians prefer to look to the past. Visitors are told to go to Mount Hope Cemetery, where Frederick Douglass, the slavery abolitionist, and Susan B. Anthony, the women's suffrage leader, are buried. Her home is another attraction, but everyone from cab drivers to Ms. Miller to the mayor warned against venturing into the neighbourhood (just past Nick Tahou Hots).

"Oh, we have no problem here," Joanne Middleton, the docent, insisted to the one and only visitor of the day. "The neighbourhood is fine."--

The ferry set sail from Perth, Australia on Feb. 17, 2004 and headed across the Pacific towards the Panama Canal and then up the east coast. On Feb. 20th CATS announced that the ferry would fly the Bahamian flag. That would prove to be a big mistake.

The official name of the fast ferry was "Spirit of Ontario I" but CATS also wanted to have a nickname. A contest was run and on March 3rd the nickname was made official as "The Breeze."

When The Breeze arrives in New York City on April 1st, where it is damaged. Reports were that the vessel's aluminum hull was slightly damaged while docking for a public relations event at Pier 17 at the South Street Seaport. Austal hadn't turned over ownership yet so they had to perform emergency repairs before continuing on through the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the St. Lawrence Seaway. The "minor damage" was a 24 foot long hole just above the water line.

While in the New York harbor a TV crew was filming some background scenes and later the ferry appears in *CSI/New York*. The ferry leaves New York City on April 19th at about 10 A.M.



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The ferry arrived in the Port of Rochester on April 24th at around 9 A.M. It was cold and rainy but there were many people there to welcome the ferry.



The Rochester TV people were all there. The newspaper was there. Even some Rochester radio stations were there. But when asked if any press from Toronto was there covering the arrival, the answer was; no.

Photo by Dick Halsey



Everyone was impressed at how big the ferry was. In fact, it was 284 foot long (86.6m) and 78 foot wide (23.8m) and stood as tall as a four story building. There was room for 750 passengers and room for 220 cars (if there wasn't any buses). They would find that the ferry was very comfortable and also had a bar, snack bar, two theatres, a duty free shop, a game room and even had wireless internet access.



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So the ferry had arrived and everyone thought it would be running soon. But an inspection found that the engines had problems and needed to be repaired. The work could not be done in Rochester so in May of 2004 the ferry went to Canada for repairs. It took a few weeks for the work on the engines to be completed. Finally the ferry had passed all inspections and was ready to sail. The first trip was a promotional \$500 a ticket black-tie Rotary club fundraiser on June 17th.

Photo by Dick Halsey



The first day of public trips were not even 50% full, in part because the start of service had been moved back a couple of times caused by the needed repairs.

The ferry was enjoyed by almost everyone who sailed on it. That, in spite of the fact that it did not save that much time as apposed to driving to Toronto. The terminal at Toronto had not even been started and tents were being used. The price also was not cheap. For an adult to walk-on it was \$28US. A car cost \$40US with an additional \$20 per adult and \$10 for a child aged 5 - 17. Plus while being inspected by the US



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Coast Guard it was determined as the ship was flagged as being from the Bahamas, that it would need a pilot to enter US waters. That was an additional \$6000 per trip. And Canada also added a customs fee of \$2500 per trip. Those costs were passed on to each passenger as an additional \$4 per person. So a family of four with a car would cost \$122 for a one-way trip.

On June 26th an engine overheats and trips are canceled which stranded a few people in Toronto. CATS did supply a bus for those that were inconvenienced.

Photo by Dick Halsey



By mid-August 2004 work was just beginning on the terminal building in Toronto. There were two sold out trips on Aug. 24th because of a baseball game of the Blue Jays versus the Yankees. So all appeared to be going well.

It came as a big surprise on Sept. 7th when CATS ended service. They said was because of the additional costs of fuel, pilot and custom fees. The next day there were some people that came to the terminal that had not heard that service had been suspended. Emergency meetings were called between between EFIC (the Australian lender) CATS, Rochester officials, Toronto officials for September 15 - 20. Then the cards started to fall

when on September 28th the ferry was impounded by federal Marshals for owing \$370,000 to Amarada Hess for fuel. Then EFIC demanded the money that they were owed. Negotiations fell apart and everyone would be headed to court.



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Mayor Johnson finally came up with a plan to have the City of Rochester buy the ferry and run it as a separate entity. In the meantime, it is decided in Federal Court that the ferry will be sold at auction to pay off the debts. Mayor Johnson finally gets a verbal agreement with EFIC in mid December that they will loan the City of Rochester \$40 million to buy the ferry. On Dec. 21st City Council OKs the deal with EFIC.



As the auction gets close, on Feb. 7, 2005, representatives from the Turkish government toured the ferry as possible bidders. The very next day, it is revealed that the ferry has a cracked fuel tank.

The ferry is sold at auction Feb. 28, 2005 to Rochester Ferry Company LLC, a subsidiary of the City of Rochester for \$32 million. The only other bid was from EFIC who bid \$29 million. The City of Rochester was now in the ferry business.

The City must have been working ahead because an agreement with Bay Ferries is reached March 8th. The Board of Managers of the Rochester Ferry Company authorized a three-year agreement with Bay Ferries Limited of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada to operate the fast ferry service between Rochester and Toronto. That comes as welcome news as Bay Ferries is successfully operating ferries elsewhere.



On Apr. 24th the head gaskets are being repaired on the ferry in Port of Rochester. Then on Apr. 27th it was announced that the nickname was now going to be "The CAT" and that service should begin on June 17th.

Meanwhile CATS was still making news. On May 11th the press found out that a company named Maplestar (same people as owned CATS) only pays \$1 per year rent for the Rochester terminal building.

On May 15th the ferry leaves for St Catharine's, Ontario to be painted, have minor repairs and be inspected. The very next day the ferry is sitting in a dry dock when it slides off the dry dock and back into the water. Luckily there is no damage.



"Spirit of Ontario I" docked at the Port Weller Dry Dock in St. Catharines, Ontario, May 30, 2005.

Photo by Ryan Tucker.

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On May 17th the following fares were released:

2005 Rochester – Toronto Rates		
All Rates in US Dollars Peak Sailings: 6/25 – 9/5/05 (Other dates TBD – Yankees, etc.)		
Passenger Fares	Off Peak Sailings One Way	Peak Sailings One Way
Adults (14-59)	\$29.00	\$32.00
Youth (6-13)	\$10.00	\$12.00
Children (0-5)	\$0.00	\$0.00
Seniors (60+)	\$25.00	\$28.00
Passenger Seat Upgrade:		
Business Class	\$44.00	\$47.00
Low Vehicles to 6'6"		
Vehicle & Trailer up to 20'	\$30.00	\$35.00
Vehicle & Trailer 21' to 30'	\$45.00	\$50.00
Vehicle & Trailer 31' to 40'	\$60.00	\$65.00
Vehicle & Trailer 41' to 50'	\$100.00	\$105.00
Motorcycles	\$20.00	\$25.00
Motorcycle & Side Car	\$30.00	\$35.00
Motorcycle & Trailer	\$35.00	\$40.00
Bicycles	\$10.00	\$10.00
Bicycles & Trailer	\$15.00	\$15.00
Medium Vehicles 6'7" - 8'4"		
Vehicle & Trailer up to 20'	\$40.00	\$45.00
Vehicle & Trailer 21' to 30'	\$55.00	\$60.00
Vehicle & Trailer 31' to 40'	\$70.00	\$75.00
Vehicle & Trailer 41' to 50'	\$110.00	\$115.00
High Vehicles 8'5" - 14'9"		
Vehicle & Trailer up to 20'	\$180.00	\$185.00
Vehicle & Trailer 21' to 30'	\$195.00	\$200.00
Vehicle & Trailer 31' to 40'	\$210.00	\$215.00
Vehicle & Trailer 41' to 50'	\$250.00	\$255.00
Car Load Special: Maximum 6 Persons. Includes vehicle to 6'6" H & 20' L. Rates available for other vehicle classifications.		
Car Load Special (Maximum 6 persons)	\$117.00	\$131.00
*\$10 per foot surcharge for vehicles in excess of 50'		
* Return Vehicle Discount	\$15.00	
Port & Security Fee	\$5.00	

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Total Fees per person	\$5.00	
Motorcoach Rates	Off Peak One Way	Peak One Way
Adult (approx. 35% off rack)	\$19.00	\$21.00
Motorcoach	\$200.00	\$200.00
For information on group sales please call 1- 866-864-7447		
Port & security fee applied to all passengers including bus and group passengers		

The ferry returned to Rochester in early June. On July 18th it was announced that there would be a public tour of the ferry on the 26th.

Photo by Dick Halsey



The turn out for the tour was attended by many more people than expected. The tour was only supposed to last a few hours but the line for the tour was almost a mile long so Bay Ferries decide to let everyone have the tour.

The first thing you do was to climb the stairs to get up to the entrance.



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Then you go over a short gangplank.....



The seats are very comfortable....



The stairs to the second floor.



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The tour didn't last very long but it helped many to see the ferry for the first time. It was probably the best advertising that was ever done for the ferry. This is the logo on the side of the ferry.

The Toronto terminal finally opened on June 28th. Still, the first trip from Rochester to Toronto on June 30th only had 358 people on board.



The best reason to take the ferry was this fantastic view of Toronto as you enter the port. The dome shape to the left of the CN tower is the Rogers Centre.

Photo by Steve Bieck



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This is a high magnification picture of the ferry sitting at port in Toronto taken from the CN tower.

Photo by Steve Bieck



This picture of the ferry in port at Toronto was taken from the much smaller ferry that runs from Toronto to the Toronto Island.

Photo by Steve Bieck



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This is a very un-glamorous picture of cars parked in the upper level of the cargo hold of the ferry. The lower level of the cargo hold was tall enough for a bus.

Photo by Dick Halsey



On Aug. 7th two trips from Rochester to Toronto were sold out because of the baseball game between the Yankees and Blue Jays.

Photo by Dick Halsey



Then there were other problems. On Aug. 21st the ferry hits dock in Toronto and breaks three windows. On Oct. 18th, a fuel line to one of the four engines of the ferry loosened, causing the engine to lose power. The captain, recognizing that the combination of that loss of power and the potentially rough waters, decided not to sail across the lake and turned back to port in Rochester. Then on Oct. 28th the ferry has a problem with propulsion system.

The main champion of the ferry had always been Mayor Johnson and in November 2005 he did not run for re-election.

It came as a big shock to almost everyone when Bay Ferries announced on Dec. 8th that they would suspend service on Dec. 12th because they were out of working cash. So on Dec. 14th Mayor Johnson asked for \$10 million from City Council to continue the ferry. This time the City Council were very reluctant to advance more money to keep the ferry running. It was decided to wait until after the first of the year when new people would be on the Council.

Mayor Bob Duffy took office on Jan 1, 2006 and one of the first jobs he had to do



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was go over all the ferry paperwork and make a decision on the ferry. On Jan. 10th he announced that everything he had seen showed that the ferry could not every make money so he asked City Council to sell the ferry. On Jan. 17th City Council agrees to pay off all ferry debts and sell ferry. So the waiting began for the ferry to leave.



Photos above and below by Dick Halsey



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The ferry sat until April 19th when it was announced that it would go for a test drive. The press all showed up to cover the story.



The ferry is heading out to Lake Ontario in this picture. Note the pier to the left.

Photo by Dick Halsey

The ferry was sold at auction to EuroFerries Ltd. on May 3, 2006 for \$29.8 million. This organization was a new company that was going to run between England and France. At first it was announced that the ferry might be leaving within the week. The only problem was that Euroferries didn't have any financial backing. So again everyone was waiting for the ferry to leave.



The logos were painted out on the ferry in hopes that it would be leaving soon.

Photo by Dick Halsey

On July 27th, Alan Hevesi (NY State Comptroller) releases a ferry audit which criticizes both the City of Rochester and CATS. The



report notes that the City selected CATS without trying to receive other bids. Also the City was criticized for allowing Maplestar to rent the terminal building for only \$1 per year even after the ferry service concluded.

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The ferry sat at the port all of 2006 and City officials keep hoping for money to come from Euroferries. As the end of the year approached and the St. Lawrence Seaway was going to close, they realized that the ferry needed to be near the Atlantic Ocean. Mayor Duffy said that he would give at least 24 hours notice so that people could say good-bye to the ferry. As it turned



out Mayor Duffy only gave about 4 hours notice that the ferry is leaving. The ferry gave a final whistle salute and left Rochester on Dec. 21, 2006 at 6:45 P.M. for Halifax, Nova Scotia where repairs were made, including finally doing a complete repair of the gash made when it hit the dock in New York City before it even arrived in Rochester.

The ferry is sitting in a spot where it could leave across the Atlantic at any time. City officials are still hoping that Euroferries can come up with the money. It was mid March 2007 until the City finally gave up any hope that Eurferries would complete the sale. They started looking for another buyer. It is announced on April 2nd that the ferry was sold to German company FRS for \$30 million (which still left the City with debt). Even better is that FRS gave a large down payment and pays in full within a week. The ferry sets sails for Britain to be painted and re-fitted. By late August, the ferry, now named "Tanger Jet II," began service from Tarifa, Spain to Tanger, Morocco. The pictures on the next two pages are from the FRS website while on that route. It made a round trip every few hours and it appears that all the mechanical problems that plagued it in Rochester are all in the past.



On June 18, 2012 the ferry started running between Kalundborg and Aarhus in Denmark. At that time it was renamed the Dolphin Jet. This route was suspended in October 2013.

In 2015 the ferry is owned by Conferry of Venezuela. It runs between Puerto La Cruz and Isla Margarita.

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