

News

Fast ferry must be recognised as an essential service – Gozo Business Chamber CEO



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The fast ferry service linking the Grand Harbour to Gozo must be recognised as an essential service, Gozo Business Chamber CEO Daniel Borg told *The Malta Independent on Sunday*.

"The service is not reaching its full potential to be a game-changer as it was initially intended," he said when asked about a service that initially started with regular crossings but which later were drastically reduced as a result of low patronage.

The government is willing to support the two operators of the service. Last September it was reported that the authorities were seeking approval from the European Commission to offer Virtu Ferries and Gozo Fast Ferry operators an additional €12m two-year public service contract, which is recognised as state aid.

This was proposed after the same Commission had just approved up to €2m for each ferry operator under the EU's Temporary Crisis Framework scheme.

As the situation currently stands, "the level of service provided is not desirable at all", continued Borg.

During a Parliamentary Standing committee on Gozo Affairs last June, Borg had said that at the time the service had already been reduced significantly from when it had been initially launched.

At the time, the service had been reduced to four crossings departing from Valletta and four from Gozo.

"Certainly this is not desirable," he had said.

The Gozo Tourism Association is also unhappy with the situation.

"At a time when the Gozo Tourism Association was very optimistic about the increased connectivity between Gozo and Malta, the present winter timetable is a clear setback for the social and economic aspirations of the Island region of Gozo," CEO Joe Muscat told this newspaper.

He added that the reduced winter schedule has evidently lessened the reliability and confidence in the fast ferry service which in turn leads to a reduction in the number of commuters.

Additionally he said that the number of trips being performed currently by the fast ferry cannot possibly meet the needs of the government.

The Gozo University Group also expressed its concern "about the current situation of transport in our islands".

"As a student organisation, we are trying our best and having constant dialogue with the relevant authorities to better, even by a small amount, the current

situation," the GUG said.

Apart from concern on the fast ferry operations, the GUG also pointed out problems on the X1 Bus route and called for the re-introduction of the X300 route.

It said that many students have reached out to the organisation and said that "the current (fast ferry) timetable doesn't satisfy their needs".

It is of the utmost importance that the number of fast ferry trips increases for the benefit of Gozitan students and workers alike, as promised by the authorities.

The organisation said that it will be publishing the results of a survey done among students on the current fast ferry situation.

Many of those interviewed are not satisfied with the current schedules and services. They wish that the services are improved to meet the quality people expect and deserve.

In a press statement issued last September, the Transport Ministry said that from their end the operators are committing themselves that if a €12m public service contract is approved they will provide the necessary service according to the needs of the nation.

Additionally there would also be an agreement for a new schedule with agreed prices.

Borg said that when the fast ferry service was initially launched it "offered respite to many Gozitans who travel to Malta to work and study".

He added that when the ferry service was first introduced, it was very well integrated with the land public transport system, with the timing of buses to the hospital and university linked with the fast ferry schedule.

"However confidence was (subsequently) eroded with frequent changes in the timetable and people could not plan ahead."

Borg pointed out that this service "must be seen as an essential service in view of Gozo's isolation, which merits specific attention, since Gozo's needs are different".

Borg said that when the government builds roads on the main island of Malta "no one questions their costs" since they are seen as a necessity to improve accessibility.

He said that the same perspective needs to be adopted for the channel between the sister islands and that is why the government needs to ensure that the service is offered at a desirable frequency and level.

"Only when Gozo is treated as a distinct region with its own needs but also potential to contribute at a national level, that we can really see Gozo advance at all levels," he said.

On the same perspective, the Gozo Tourism Association said that it welcomes "the government's resolve to support this service".



It hopes that the European Commission continues to comprehend and acknowledge the difficulties experienced by Gozitans, given the double insularity of the island.