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The Portland Daily Sun

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Dueling plans eye next-summer NS ferry service

By Curtis Robinson
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After a period when it seemed unlikely that anyone would propose restored ferry service between New England and Nova Scotia for next summer, now there are dueling efforts — and both insist the 2011 season is a serious target.


The competition is becoming more evident as potential operators make their plans public. For example, Scotia Cruises, the company that has suggested it might bring back the old Scotia Prince boat that left the city in 2005 amid lawsuits and controversy, announced on its website yesterday that it is "... moving forward with a 2011 season sailing from Halifax, Nova Scotia to New England." On Twitter, the company says "Thank you for your support. We hope to have final decision on route in October. Have narrowed down vessel & receiving good resumes."

Meanwhile, there was news for other ferry hopefuls in Yarmouth, N.S.


"I didn't know about that," said David Whiting, who directs Yarmouth's ferry efforts as chief executive officer for the Yarmouth Area Industrial Commission.

He confirmed that Scotia Cruises was among about 15 firms that were involved in earlier negotiations for the Yarmouth route, but were not one of the five that actually continued in the process. He praised the operational experience of the Scotia Cruise organization, noting that the "core" of the group managed the Scotia Prince cruises.


"Their [Scotia Cruises] operational plans didn't mesh with ours," said Whiting. "They're not in the mix for



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The deadline for Yarmouth-based proposals from the remaining firms is Oct. 15.

It is unclear what effect announcing plans to operate between Halifax and New England might have on other plans, whether announced or not. Some experts in the field have argued that it's already too late for any ferry service to launch next summer, pointing out, for example, that it's too late to include the ferry in tour bus packages, which have historically been good business.

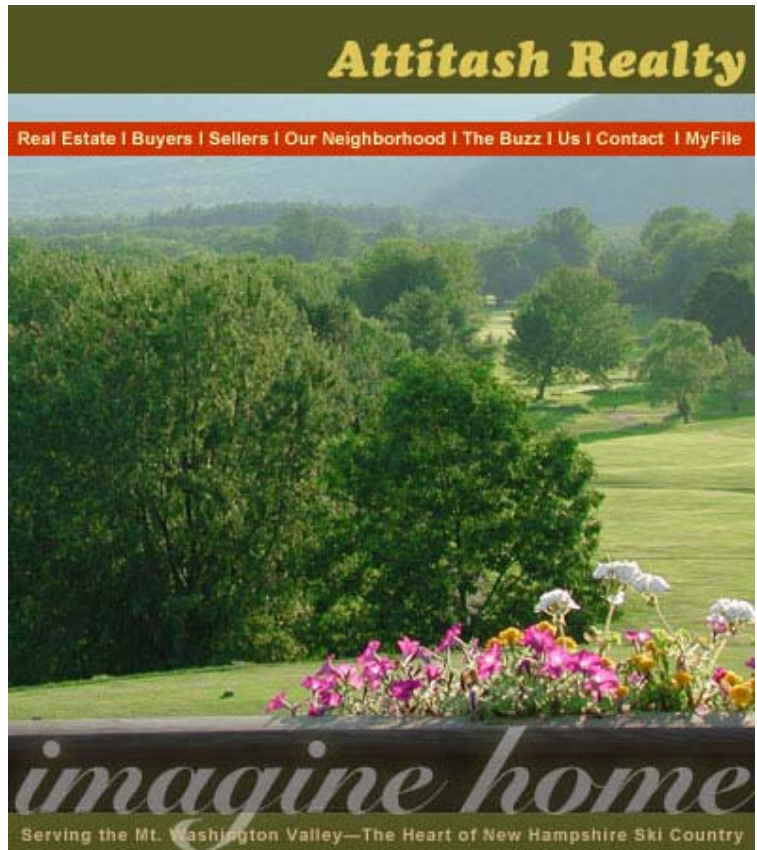
Both the Yarmouth-based and the Halifax-based planners say they can operate next year, and both are for much slower service than the 11-hour crossing offered by the Cat, which exited the market after years of financial losses last year. Studies have indicated that on-board income suffered with the shorter runs while other logistical challenges, including passenger complaints of seasickness, increased.

Scotia Cruises, in its website announcement, says it will offer a 20-hour cruise. In other details, it says the vessel "... will carry approximately 1,000+ passengers and 200+ vehicles. Our on-board amenities will include: hotel, casino, slots, restaurant, cafe, lounge, duty free shopping, salon, spa and live entertainment..."

Those details had already been widely reported. Neither potential route has committed to Portland as its New England base, but Whiting said Maine's largest city makes good sense for several reasons. Boston, he explained, is too far for daily service while other areas lack Portland's population and facilities. When fuel costs are considered, he added, Portland emerges as a strong contender. For its part, Scotia Cruises is posting a survey asking for feedback on Boston, Portland and Portsmouth, N.H. It's also apparently consider a return of the Scotia Prince.

Citing company sources, The Portland Press Herald reported that Scotia Cruises "is negotiating for a vessel and has three options, including the 38-year-old Scotia Prince. That would give the service an immediate advantage with passenger recognition."

As with the Yarmouth effort, it seems like deadlines loom this month for the Halifax option.



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