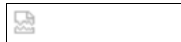


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Letting The Cat in - Ports director says high-speed ferry would be boon to Portland

By Chris Busby

PORTLAND - City Ports and Transportation Director Captain Jeff Monroe has been pondering a question for the past two years, he says, studying reports and statistics in hopes of arriving at an answer. At last, he has.

The question: Could two ferry companies making runs between Portland and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, compete and survive?

The answer: If the two ferries are the Scotia Prince and a high-speed ferry like The Cat, which makes runs between Yarmouth and Bar Harbor, then yes.

Furthermore, Monroe says, the city could suffer serious economic consequences if it does not encourage such competition on its waterfront, thereby making another port an attractive location for a ferry like The Cat.

"Having a competing service at another port would be much more devastating to Portland than having competitive services in the same port," he said in a recent interview.

Monroe is not pondering this question in a vacuum. The city manager's office is preparing to enter lease negotiations with representatives of Scotia Prince Cruises, the company that operates the Scotia Prince, a cruise ship that makes runs between Portland and Yarmouth in the spring, summer and fall. The lease is for a potential berth at the Ocean Gateway cruise ship facility the city hopes to complete on the eastern end of the waterfront by 2006.

Scotia Prince Cruises insists it has the right to an exclusive berth at the facility, given that the late City Manager Bob Ganley sent a letter of intent to the vessel's former owner in 2000 expressing interest in granting the Scotia Prince such a deal.

However, the Portland City Council, which will give guidance to the city manager's office during negotiations and which must ultimately approve the lease, has grown increasingly uneasy with the idea of giving one company an exclusive right to use the publicly financed facility. City officials do not feel bound by the contents of Ganley's letter.

Monroe's department is finishing a set of recommendations to be given to the city manager's office for use during lease negotiations. Monroe said that at the very least, it is likely his department will recommend that the city's lawyers seek an opinion from the Federal Maritime Commission regarding the legality of granting Scotia Prince Cruises an exclusive deal. The commission has ruled against monopolistic deals at public facilities in the past, and state transportation officials are also wary of such an arrangement, fearing the loss of federal funding.

Monroe's views on the economic consequences of an exclusive deal are also likely to influence the council's decisions.

In short, Scotia Prince Cruises' hopes for an exclusive arrangement are sinking fast.