

Ferry to Nova Scotia still in talks

Cargo, passenger service eyed

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PORTSMOUTH — The elimination of Canadian government subsidies for a ferry service from Maine to Nova Scotia has not dampened plans to develop regular service from Portsmouth.

Canadian company Bay Ferries announced in December that it was ending the seasonal service between Maine and Nova Scotia after officials said government support would not be available for the 2010 season. Bay Ferries operated The Cat from Bar Harbor and Portland to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. The high-speed ferry operated seasonally from late May to October, coinciding with Maine's tourist season.

"I became concerned when I saw the Canadian government stopped subsidies on The Cat and how it might affect their project," said Marconi. "But to the best of my knowledge, they are still in the process of doing an economic analysis and that shouldn't have an impact."

Last year, officials at the Ports of Yarmouth and New Hampshire expressed interested in developing a ferry service that would operate year round. Though a final plan is not in place, the two sides were serious enough to have Marconi, Pease Development Authority Executive Director David Mullen and Port Committee Chairman Anthony McManus travel to Yarmouth for a tour of the facilities.

The plan included both cargo and passenger service. Providing an alternative to trucks driving 800 miles from Nova Scotia to New Hampshire to deliver cargo was key, as it would help sustain the service during the winter months when passenger interest is limited. For the average ferry boat, the trip from port to port across the Bay of Fundy is 12 hours.

"The lack of available Canadian subsidy money may hamper our efforts," said Mullen, "but if the economic analysis Yarmouth was doing suggests there is enough interest in shipping cargo from Yarmouth year round, then the limited capacity ferry we were contemplating might be further strengthened if our service was the only one available."

Pease and Yarmouth officials agreed on a memorandum of cooperation in summer 2009, which explicitly stated both sides were interested in pursuing a potential partnership.

Marconi said initial talks have also centered around receiving subsidies from the Canadian government and significant infrastructure upgrades at the Port of Yarmouth. The Portsmouth terminal, Mullen said, would require only minor upgrades to accommodate a ferry of the type being discussed. Roll on/roll off, or "Ro-ro," ferries are vessels designed to carry wheeled cargo on vehicles that can drive on and off the boat with the use of a hydraulic ramp.

A timetable on a decision is not known, Marconi said, making and the potential launch date for ferry service even more unclear.