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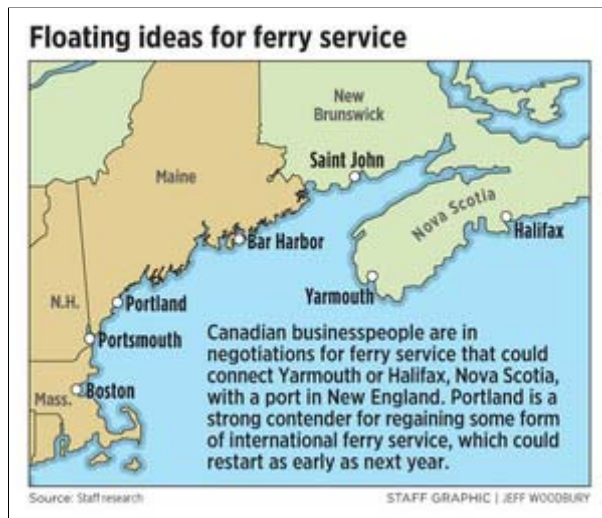
September 2

Portland a top option for ferry to Maritimes

Nova Scotia officials are eager to resume a cruise-type service that had linked the regions until 2004.

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Negotiations are under way to resume ferry service between Nova Scotia and New England as early as next year, and Portland is a top contender to be a ferry port, sources in Canada say.



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One plan would restore the link between Portland and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Ferry service between Maine and Nova Scotia ended last year after Bay Ferries Ltd. stopped running the high-speed Cat, citing falling ridership and the loss of an operating subsidy from the province.

Another proposal would connect Nova Scotia's largest city -- Halifax -- with New England, possibly at Portland. That plan could bring back the Scotia Prince, the cruise ferry that ran between Portland and Yarmouth until 2004. The ship has most recently

been sailing in Italy.

A handful of additional proposals are on the table, officials say, including ferries that would dock in Boston or Portsmouth, N.H., or resume service to Bar Harbor.

None of the plans involves a high-speed ferry. The focus is on conventional vessels in the 500-foot range that can carry trucks and buses and offer a cruise experience, with overnight accommodations and entertainment.

The New England market can support only one ferry, experts say. If service is to resume in 2011, a deal must be firm this fall, to leave time for marketing and other preparations.

Business and government interests in Nova Scotia are eager for ferry service to resume. Maintaining a viable sea connection with New England is important for tourism. It also cuts driving time for truckers who move fish and other goods to and from the United States.

But any new service will face challenges. Neither Maine nor Portland has money to help support a ferry, and Nova Scotia has ended its operating subsidy.

A new ferry operator would have to be aggressive in order to rebuild tourist traffic to the province, which has fallen dramatically in recent years. It also could face competition for passengers from a growing fleet of cruise ships that call on Maine and the Maritimes.

The Halifax proposal involves a group of Nova Scotia business people and investors, some of whom worked with the Scotia Prince.

"Everything is coming together as we've anticipated," said Bruce McNeil, a spokesman for Scotia Cruises.

McNeil said the group is considering Portland, although he declined to name two other ports in contention. A survey on the group's website asks participants if they prefer to sail from Portland, Portsmouth, N.H., or Boston.

Using Portland as an example, McNeil said the ferry would leave around 8 p.m. and arrive in Halifax at 4 p.m. the next day, a 20-hour trip. The service would run from April to October. The ship could carry 1,000 passengers and 200 vehicles. It would include a casino, food service and live entertainment.

The service would have to average 781 passengers per trip over 211 days to be profitable, McNeil said. 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.

"If the Scotia Prince came back, I think it would great from a marketing standpoint," McNeil said.

There's also strong interest in resuming ferry service in Yarmouth, which has been highly dependent on American tourists.

The community is close to signing a lease to use the existing ferry terminal. It wants to sign a contract with an operator by late October. Officials say they have spoken with seven potential operators and have "expressions of interest" for various routes.

"I expect Portland to be pretty well up there, when all is said and done," said Dave Whiting, interim chief executive officer for the Yarmouth Area Industrial Commission.

A Yarmouth-to-Portland route has advantages, Whiting said. A ferry can make the 225-mile round trip in a day, saving fuel. And the relatively sheltered waters between the two ports would allow for a limited winter schedule to accommodate commercial traffic.

But attracting passengers will be critical, and a recent study in Nova Scotia showed discouraging trends. From 2001 to 2008, passenger traffic between Yarmouth and Maine fell from a peak of 300,000 to 85,000.

The decline was sharpest after the Scotia Prince left, leading McNeil to conclude that travelers want a vacation experience more than speedy transportation.

"The Cat was a ferry operation; we're a cruise ferry," he said. "They are two different products."

The prospect of service resuming in Portland, which built a terminal to serve the Cat, is of great interest to city officials. Passengers often stay in hotels, eat in restaurants and visit shops on both ends of their journeys.

"We have been very encouraged by recent conversations with our Canadian counterparts to restore ferry service from Portland to Nova Scotia," said Portland City Manager Joe Gray. "Portland is a natural location for an international ferry service. We have decades of experience and long-held relationships with Nova Scotia."

Whether proposals from Yarmouth or Halifax win out, experts say the outcome may be good for Portland, which has everything in place to handle a ferry. Boston and Portsmouth, N.H., have terminal plans, but nothing built, said Jeff Monroe, a senior maritime consultant for HDR Inc., an international consulting firm.

"If someone wants to get started as early as next year, Portland is a good location," he said.

Monroe's views were echoed by Christopher Wright, president of the Mariport Group Ltd. marine consulting firm in Digby, Nova Scotia.

Portland's one-day turnaround from Yarmouth and the proximity of hotels and other amenities to the ferry terminal make Portland an appealing choice, he said. But for service to begin in 10 months, an operator must be lined up very soon.

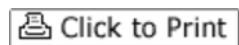
"You need to start getting notices and advertising out, to prime the pump," he said.
"To me, the time's getting awfully short."

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