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Five firms eye returning Nova Scotia ferry

By **Curtis Robinson**
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At least five companies are interested in providing ferry service between Maine and Nova Scotia, fueling hope that service could be restored as early as next spring, according to Canadian officials.

Dave Whiting, who directs Yarmouth, Nova Scotia's efforts to continue the century-old sea link between his community and the Portland area, confirmed Tuesday that requests for proposals were sent to 15 companies and that eight initially indicated interest.

"We had discussions with eight firms," said Whiting. "And three of those dropped out, but the other five remained interested."

October 15 is the proposal deadline.

The formal proposal process is the latest in a series of steps toward replacing the ferry service that ended last winter. That service from the high-speed Cat involved years of government subsidy. Whiting says Canadian subsidies hit \$20 million over the past five or six years, but the new proposals will not rely on subsidies.

In part, say Whiting and others advocating a return to ferry service, the Cat suffered from being a high-speed service. The boat was not as cargo-friendly as larger, slower ferries, and faster crossings limited on-board revenue opportunities.

A study funded by the Canadian government and released in July seemed to suggest that service would be a financial challenge, but advocates of a ferry dismissed the findings. A key element, they



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said, is that the report focused on high-speed service.

"I don't think anybody in their right mind would go back to high-speed," said Whiting.

Another big step came in late summer when the national Canadian government settled on terms for its shipping terminal facility at Yarmouth. Whiting admitted yesterday that the contracts are not actually signed, but asserted that "it's a done deal" that Yarmouth controls the facility.

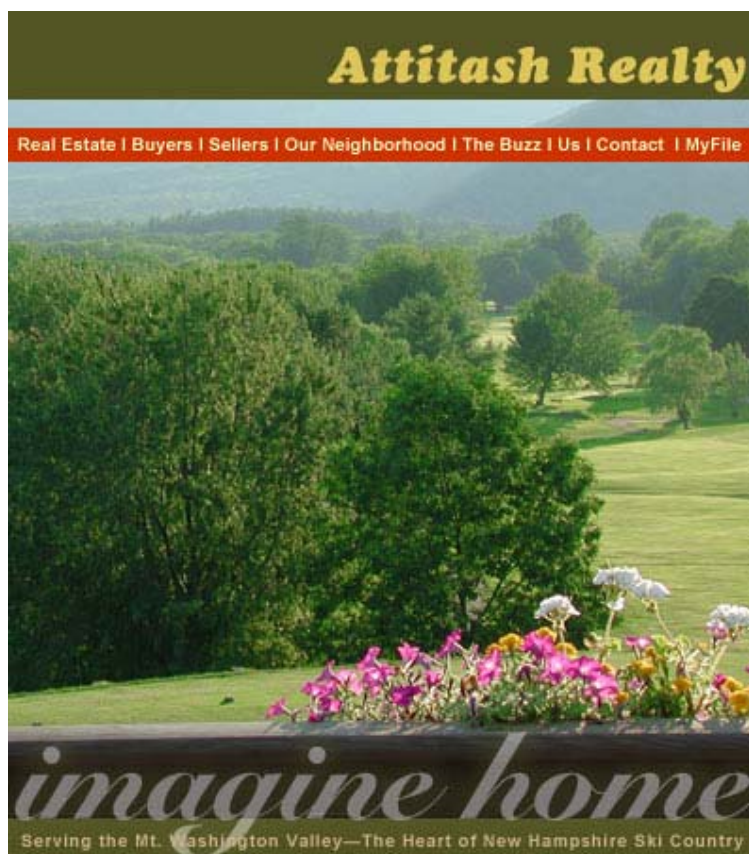
The loss of a Nova Scotia service may have been a blow to Portland's tourism industry, but for the 7,000 residents of Yarmouth it has become a social cause worthy of theme songs, YouTube campaigns and protests drawing hundreds of ferry fans.

It seems clear that any new service would be significantly slower than the Cat, which was listed among the world's most amazing machines and made the crossing in about six hours. By comparison, the Scotia Prince, the longtime slow boat to Yarmouth that exited the city amid lawsuits and settlements in 2005, took about 11 hours to make the journey.

But the slow crossing also generated more onboard revenue. Whiting asserts that the slower ship generated 68 percent of its revenue onboard, as opposed to about 7 percent for the rougher-riding Cat.

As the proposals are evaluated, says Whiting, they will be shared with Portland and Maine state officials. He stuck to the plan to have unsubsidized operations, but conceded that some startup help from the communities might make sense.

He said Portland officials remain in the loop for the ferry service, adding that he'd spoken to Portland City Manager Joe Gray just this week about service progress.



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