

## Boblo homecoming

One of the beloved boats is returning to Detroit

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The 97-year-old Ste. Claire, one of the Boblo boats ingrained in local history, will be tugged up the Detroit River later this month to kick off the weeklong celebration of the renovated Detroit riverfront.

The Boblo boat will dock at Tricentennial State Park at the start of the International River Days on June 22 and remain there through Nov. 9.

Visitors can walk through it, buy souvenirs and become part of renovation efforts that will start this fall.

"A lot of people's first memories of the Detroit River have to do with time they spent on the Boblo boat," said Caroline Marks, spokeswoman for the Detroit RiverFront Conservancy. "It's a perfect fit" for the city's River Days, she said.

The journey of the 197-foot steamboat, which holds memories for generations of local families and couples, is one that twists and turns.

The Ste. Claire is one of two boats that used to take metro Detroiters to an amusement park on Boblo Island, now a luxury condo development. The boats have been passed around to various owners since the park closed in 1993.

A New York investor owns the Columbia, the other Boblo boat.

Several efforts to get them back in operation have failed.

And the Ste. Claire might have wasted away if it weren't for an intensive care doctor who is determined to restore the vessel.

Dr. Ron Kattoo, 39, of Bloomfield Hills bought the boat in March 2006 from Diane Evon of Cleveland, who bought it years earlier with her then-husband John Belko.

The couple bought it on Sept. 11, 2001, and had moved it around to different shipyards, renovating it and using it for a haunted house on Halloween.

Kattoo and two friends formed Maximus Corp. and bought the Ste. Claire. The team had a dream of slowly breathing life into the boat and hauling it back to Detroit for the public to enjoy.

In December, the Free Press told Kattoo's story, prompting an unexpected outpouring of support that Kattoo wasn't quite ready for.

Kattoo, associate director of Henry Ford Hospital's intensive care unit, received a barrage of letters from readers wanting to help revive the boat.

"I had about 400 letters and hundreds of e-mails," Kattoo said, adding that people have continued to write.

His three-person team has grown to hundreds of volunteers as event planners, engineers, designers and fund-raising experts have contacted Kattoo.

Since December, Kattoo has been going to the Toledo shipyard -- where the Ste. Claire is now -- to clean up the boat.

His plan for the vessel initially involved turning the Ste. Claire into a sparkly fantasyland of restaurants, clubs, movie theaters and bars. That plan remains in place. However, some things have changed.

The boat will become a nonprofit, run by a board of directors, which will make it easier to raise money and apply for grants. He has an immediate goal of raising \$5 million to get restorations going as soon as possible.

"Going nonprofit will enable us to get grants and corporate sponsorships and will allow the public to become fully involved," he said.

In the fall, the Ste. Claire will be placed in dry storage for renovations. Kattoo hopes to have the boat in operation by 2010.

While searching for a permanent dock for the Ste. Claire, Kattoo wanted to bring the boat back to the area as soon as possible. It was Kattoo's idea to make the Boblo boat a part of the River Days.

"I was trying to find a place for the summer," he said. "I called the RiverFront conservancy and when I heard of the River Days, I thought it would be perfect for the ship."

Mike Evans, 44, of Waterford is one of hundreds of volunteers who have helped bring the boat back.

A graphic artist, he helped make logos and promotional materials. He also has gotten involved in cleanup efforts.

"It's easy to be awestruck by the size of the thing and the history involved," he said, adding that he will be part of the towing crew that brings the Ste. Claire to Detroit.

Andy Whitman, a former sailor from Woodhaven, said he is thrilled to see the vessel return.

"This boat is a very small key to a very rich history of passenger ships that traveled the waters of Detroit," said Whitman, 40. "People used to catch the boat to get to Cleveland and Mackinac Island.

For the moment, Kattoo is spending much of his time and money on the project. He is paying to have the boat hauled to Detroit on June 22.

The Gaelic Tug Boat Co. of Lincoln Park will tug the boat to Detroit. The trip will take 6 hours, leaving at 9 a.m. and arriving in Detroit about 3 p.m.

He said he hopes spectators gather along the river to watch the Ste. Claire come home.

"The way I see it, and this might sound corny, but this is the people's boat. It's no different than the 'Spirit of Detroit,' " he said. "The more people have a part in this, the better."

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