

## On the move — again

Old Boblo boat Ste. Claire leaves Ecorse for Toledo dock

By Jim Kasuba  
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ECORSE — A floating historical treasure has left the state.

With the assistance of two tugboats, the Boblo boat Ste. Claire departed Wednesday morning from the United States Steel Corp. dock near Nicholson Terminal, disappearing from the Downriver coastline as it faded into the misty morning.

The Ste. Claire left the state under contentious conditions in River Rouge, where it spent part of last summer and fall as a fright attraction that was open to tours during the day.

The Ste. Claire outwore its welcome at Belanger Park in April when the city threatened legal action to force it to move.

Owner Diane Evon and city officials couldn't agree on how to split proceeds. The 197-foot boat was moored at the park under a lease agreement that expired April 1. Evon moved it a couple of weeks later to Ecorse, docked near its sister ship, the Columbia, which has been bought by an out-of-state owner who is taking it to New York.

The Ste. Claire sat idle during the summer, but Evon planned to open it to the public for the fright attraction, the "Nautical Nightmare," for the autumn and Halloween seasons. When she docked the boat in Ecorse, she wasn't sure where its next home would be.

Last week she announced its move to the Docks at International Park, where it spent some time in 2002. Evon recently moved to the Perrysburg, Ohio, area from the Cleveland area. She said her decision to move it there was financial.

"It is less expensive for me to pay a tug and bring it to Toledo than it was to accept the proposal River Rouge gave us," she said.

Evon had discussions with River Rouge officials in March about keeping the Ste. Claire at Belanger Park this summer and fall. She said the city wanted \$1 for each person who paid for admission to the Nautical Nightmare, in addition to the city's \$3 parking fee.

When Evon and her former husband, John Belko, bought the 96-year-old boat in 2001 for \$20,000, it was in almost total disrepair. Thousands of dollars and many hours of volunteer labor brought the ship to a condition where it's safe to walk through, she said, but there's still much more to do.

"In April I was looking at what needed to be done on the ship as far as repair

maintenance," Evon said. "No one had ever asked us to pay more than \$500. I proposed we give them \$1 a head. Their counterproposal would have netted the city nearly \$36,000. That made it completely undoable. We were already stretching our dollars."

River Rouge Mayor Michael Bowdler said he appointed a subcommittee to study the issue and it was that group that came up with the proposal.

"They put a dollar amount per head for garbage pickup and security," Bowdler said. "That was there to offset costs. Last year, all we did was charge people to get into the park. I thought the subcommittee proposal was reasonable."

Bowdler said he doesn't hold any ill feelings toward Evon, but he had to watch out for his city's interests.

"It (the Ste. Claire) did bring in a ton of people," he said. "It put us on the map. But we are on a shoestring budget. We have to cover our costs."

Evon has brought in a new business partner, Ron Kattoo of Bloomfield Hills, a physician at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit.

Kattoo is excited about his new role as executive director of the Ste. Claire Foundation, the boat's legal owner. He said the foundation will continue to seek nonprofit status, which would make restoration efforts eligible for grants. Kattoo said the boat's place on the National Historic Registry helps bolster the case for a nonprofit designation.

Although the boat and the former Boblo Island Amusement Park don't hold the same sentimental value in Toledo as they do for most Detroit area residents, Evon said the Ste. Claire received a warm reception the last time it was in Ohio.

"Everybody in Toledo has been incredibly welcoming," she said. "They are so excited to have the attraction come back to the city."

Evon has not given up hope that the boat will return Downriver some day. But in the meantime, she has to address immediate needs.

The next project is to rebuild the boat's pilothouse. The other issue to address is getting the boat to move on its own power, something she called a "river solution" as opposed to a dockside attraction.

Kattoo agreed, saying the goal is to make the Ste. Claire fully operational by 2008, which means powering itself and making it available for multiple functions, not just as a fright attraction.

The Nautical Nightmare opens to the public Sept. 28. It will be open Thursdays through Sundays until Halloween. The charge is \$15 per person.

"The boat has never had such a bright future," Evon said.

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