

Boblo boat finds a home

Forced out of Rouge, Ste. Claire now sits in Ecorse

By Jim Kasuba
 , The News-Herald

ECORSE — The former Boblo boat Ste. Claire has found a home with its sister ship, the Columbia — at least for the time being.

Forced to move from River Rouge's Belanger Park after a divided City Commission couldn't agree on a lease extension for the 197-foot boat, owner Diane Evon moved it early Friday morning to a U.S. Steel dock near Nicholson Terminal.

The situation became contentious shortly after the lease expired April 1, when the city filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court to remove the boat from its park. Evon said certain factors beyond her control made it impossible to move it as quickly as some River Rouge officials demanded.

"As soon as the city council had a 'no' vote we started coordinating the move," Evon said. "We had to coordinate Coast Guard approval and an agreement with U.S. Steel. Legal agreements don't get done overnight."

Ironically, the Ste. Claire is considered a ghost ship by the Coast Guard, Evon said, because it's not a "live" cruise ship leaving port on a regular basis. As such, maritime rules are applied differently.

The boat literally is a ghost ship in that for the past several years its main public attraction, in addition to historical tours, has been the "Nautical Nightmare," a frightening spectacle featuring an assortment of skeletons creatively posed throughout the boat's interior.

The Ste. Claire drew big crowds in River Rouge last fall for both historical tours and the Nautical Nightmare, but a group of people in town didn't want it to return.

City Hall insiders said a small but vocal group was instrumental in turning the political tide against the boat and its owner.

Some critics said the city wasn't getting its share of money the tours and fright attraction brought in. Others didn't want the boat to take up the park's limited riverfront all summer.

Technically, the boat is owned by the Ste. Claire Foundation, of which Evon is president.

Evon said the foundation abided by the lease agreement, adding that money the boat brings in has gone to pay for expenses such as insurance and permit fees, and for continuing restoration work that is expected to last several more years.

She estimates that the foundation has spent more than \$500,000 repairing the Ste. Claire since it was purchased in 2001.

Evon said she is working diligently to gain not-for-profit status, which could potentially open the door to many more donations.

In the meantime, she is glad to move the River Rouge controversy behind her and plans to sit tight for the summer.

"I have a nice sense of calm," she said Monday. "I am no longer dealing with the past — just the future."

River Rouge Commissioner Tony Laginess, credited with bringing the boat to his city, said he was disappointed that certain factions were "hell-bent" on getting the boat out of Belanger Park.

"It's a shame," Laginess said. "This boat was a big draw for the city. We've never had anything in the way of a tourist attraction. It brought people here."

Shortly after the boat departed, Laginess said Mayor Michael Bowdler told him to contact City Attorney David Bower to drop the lawsuit.

Although it has left River Rouge, Laginess said the boat remains near and dear to him.

"I'm a part of the Ste. Claire Foundation and I will follow that boat wherever it goes," Laginess said. "My intention is to see that boat restored."

Although the Ste. Claire won't be open to the public this summer, Evon said those who take the Diamond Jack boat tour of the lower Detroit River will have an opportunity to see the boat, along with the Columbia.

Both boats were retired in 1991, two years before Boblo Island amusement park closed. The Ste. Claire has returned to the place it was docked for many years after the park's closure. The Columbia has never left the location.

Last year, the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, which considered buying the Columbia, declined to do so, citing financial reasons. The fate of the dilapidated boat remains unclear.

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