

Boblo boat effort runs out of steam

Riverfront group to abandon ship

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The Boblo boat Columbia needs some help from its friends.

In the past two years, the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy has twice paid to have the 216-foot-long, 60-foot-wide vessel covered with plastic at a combined cost of roughly \$70,000.

The conservancy also paid to keep the boat at the Nicholson Terminal & Dock Co. wharf in Ecorse. And the group paid the boat's electric bills.

After looking into the possibilities of running the Columbia as a moneymaking tour boat in the Detroit River, the conservancy's board last month voted to end its support for the boat.

By spring, the responsibility for maintaining the 104-year-old steam-powered ship will return to its owner, the Steamer Columbia Foundation headed by a Detroit steamboat historian, Bill Worden.

Worden said he's glum about the boat's future. The foundation is already in debt to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which paid about \$75,000 of Columbia's bills before the conservancy got involved about two years ago. The Steamer Columbia Foundation doesn't have money to keep paying bills, he said.

The conservancy's board concluded that operating the Columbia would compete with the group's main goal of establishing a walkway along the river from the Belle Isle bridge to the Ambassador Bridge, said conservancy chief operating officer Leonard Marszalek.

After 18 months of study at a cost of \$400,000, the decision came down from the conservancy board of directors Dec. 15, said Marszalek: "I think there is a future for it, but unfortunately, it's not going to be with the conservancy."

"The economics were very marginal in today's climate in Detroit and the state of Michigan, and trying to get more contributions for the Columbia might take away from our initial vision of the river walk," he said.

In its heyday, the Columbia could carry as many as 2,566 passengers between Detroit and the amusement park on Boblo Island in the Detroit River.

A decrease in passengers would reduce revenues. (The cost of restoring the Columbia to its original condition was estimated at \$12 million, Marszalek said.)

The Columbia and a second Boblo boat, the St. Claire, carried passengers every summer from the early 1900s until the service ended in 1991.

The St. Claire is under restoration at Belanger Park's dock in River Rouge.

The Columbia "is in very, very bad condition as far as her superstructure goes," Worden said. "Her hull and machinery are



The Boblo boat Columbia is docked at the Nicholson Terminal & Dock Co. in Ecorse. Plastic shrink-wrapping protects the 104-year-old steam-powered ship from the elements. (PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press)

sound."

The boats were popular, and people still recall their trips with pleasure, Worden said.

"There's never been any question in my mind that the public appeal was there, but somehow that has never translated into money," Worden said.

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