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Wednesday, 20 April 2011 15:45

THE FOXY LADY II will remain moored in the Port Washington marina for only a few more days before heading to its home port in Green Bay. The excursion craft and its sister boat, the Harbor Lady out of Sturgeon Bay, spent the winter in Port. The owners of both boats said the local market is too small to support such tour boats year-round.

Top photo by Mark Jaeger

Excursion boat owners say local marina not likely to be a permanent stop

Two regional excursion boats found safe harbor in the Port Washington marina for the winter, but their stays won't be permanent.

The 85-foot Harbor Lady out of Sturgeon Bay and Foxy Lady II out of Green Bay moored in Port for the off-season.

Both arrived in early December, and the Harbor Lady is already taking charters back in Door County. Foxy Lady Cruises is getting ready for bookings in Green Bay starting May 1.

"When the sun comes out and the weather starts to warm, the phones start to ring, and we don't want to miss out on business," said John "Captain Mitch" Michkowski, owner of Foxy Lady Cruises.

Still, Michkowski and fellow boat owner Dave Graves said they enjoyed their winter stays in Port.

“The people in Port — from Harbormaster Dennis Cherny to City Administrator Mark Grams and just everyone we met — were awesome,” Michkowski said.

Graves agreed.

“We were both probably in Port 50 to 60 times during the winter to check on our boats. Every time we stopped at a restaurant or tavern and told people we owned the tour boats, they had 101 questions for us,” he said.

The men said they are “great friends but intensely competitive businessmen.”

Michkowski, who has been running dinner cruises for 13 years, sold his 1998 SkipperLiner to Graves when he bought a newer model yacht three years ago.

A far-cry from the SS Minnow of “Gilligan’s Island” fame, the replacement value of the boats is estimated at $3 million each. They have seating capacities of 149 in two enclosed salons as well as deckside.

“They are really floating banquet halls with heating and air conditioning,” Graves said.

The boat owners made arrangements to spend the winter in Port as an economic move, but said the prospects here for a dedicated excursion business of their size are dim.

“Because the boats are so big and there are so few facilities on Lake Michigan capable of lifting the 200,000-pound boats out of the water, we felt it would be more economical if we could keep them at dock for the winter,” Michkowski said.

“The Port harbor seemed appealing because the discharge from the We Energies power plant was supposed to keep the marina relatively ice free. It didn’t really work out that way, though, because the Oak Creek power plant was brought back on line and the Port facility wasn’t used as much this winter.”

The boat owners paid for the electricity to run “ice eaters” that protected the boats from hard freezes. They also gave the city a portion of the proceeds from several winter cruises they held during the off-season.
Because of rough water on Lake Michigan, several of those cruises had to stay at the dock.

“The customers were all very understanding, but that is an indication of one of the problems you are going to have in Port Washington,” Michkowski said.

“The design of the boats and the flat hulls is very fuel-efficient, using about six to eight gallons an hour, but you need the water to be pretty smooth.”

Those conditions are pretty typical on the Fox River in Green Bay and the Sturgeon Bay ship canal but less predictable on Lake Michigan.

“I think we had to stay at the dock six times in the four years I have been in business,” Grave said.

“Another problem in Port is there really isn’t much to see once you get past the lighthouse. The lake is beautiful, but how many hours do most people want to look at it?” Michkowski asked.

The biggest factor working against a tour boat business making Port its base of operations is economics, the men said.

“There are about 100 excursion boats operating in the U.S., and we are the smallest market in the country. Still, Green Bay is about ten times larger than Port Washington,” Michkowski said.

Graves said his company is able to operate out of Sturgeon Bay by tapping the lucrative Door County tourist trade, which draws about 2 million people a year.

“After four years in the business, this is probably going to be the first year we break even. You have to be able to count on drawing about 10,000 to 15,000 people a year,” he said.

The owners said it is unlikely Port could generate that volume of traffic, although they said smaller boats might be more able to cover their expenses here.

Even short-term stays in Port during the peak season are unlikely, the boat owners said, because they can’t run the risk of being stranded by stormy seas on the lake.

“It takes about 14 hours to go from Sturgeon Bay to Port. That’s a day going, a day for an event and a day for returning, presuming the weather cooperates that whole time,” Graves said.

“During the summer, we can have multiple bookings every day. We couldn’t afford not to be at the dock for that length of time.”

The Port docking may have been a one-time experiment for the boats.

Once every five years, the U.S. Coast Guard requires excursion boats to be pulled from the water for detailed inspections.

When their boats are not facing such inspections, the friendly competitors have talked about wintering one of their boats in Florida.

“This is not the kind of business where you are going to get rich. As long as I can cover my expenses, I’m happy. If we went to Tampa for the winter, we pretty much know we would be able to have bookings every day,” Michkowski said. “All we have to do now is convince our wives.”