

Boblo boat 'St. Claire' may find home in St. Clair

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Photos courtesy of KEVIN MAYER The Boblo boat SS Ste. Claire in its heyday.



One of the two boats that ferried visitors between Detroit and the amusement park on Boblo Island, the SS Ste. Claire, may find a permanent in home in the city of St. Clair.

"We want a small town atmosphere for what we see as a permanent dockside attraction," said Kevin Mayer, one of the three owners of the 197-foot steamship built in Toledo, Ohio in 1910.

Mayer heard about St. Clair as a landing site for the passenger ship from a St. Clair resident who contacted him about the possibility. He is especially interested in plans to reopen the historic St. Clair Inn and would like to see the SS Ste. Claire moored just south of the shuttered inn along the seawall of the city's Palmer Park.

Mayer envisions visitors to the boat staying at the inn, and weddings and banquets on the boat catered by the inn.

"If there's a hotel and restaurant right there, it could be almost like a partnership," said Mayer.

The SS Ste. Claire received its designation as a historical landmark from the National Park Service in 1992. The St. Clair Inn was listed in National Register of Historical Places in 1995.

Mayer has not yet spoken to Jeff Katofsky, the new, California-based owner of the inn.

Dr. Ron Kattoo is the principal owner of the Ste. Claire. Dr. Saquib Nakadar is Mayer's other partner.

"They are super serious about bringing the boat to town," said city council member Mitch Kuffa, who made the first semi-official outreach to Mayer.

A formal meeting between Mayer and the St. Clair City Council is scheduled to take place at 6 p.m. Oct. 17 at city hall, located at 547 N. Carney Drive in St. Clair.

"We're also considering Wyandotte," said Mayer.

Mayer is a lifelong Boblo fan.

"I worked on the SS Columbia for two seasons," he said, referring to the Ste. Claire's sister ship, now being refurbished in New York for trips on the Hudson River. The Ste. Claire made its last run in 1991. "My house is like Boblo museum."

In the meantime, Mayer estimated that it will take another two years to complete the renovation of the boat, which is currently taking place on the Rouge River near the Dix Street Bridge. But Mayer said that the St. Claire will be losing its mooring come October.

He would like to keep the renovation work in the vicinity of the downtown Detroit because that's where his workforce lives.

"We have a crew working on the ship now," said Mayer. The steel work is underway, including adding support beams to the ship. Woodwork will follow.

Mayer does not rule out the eventual retrofitting of the boat to include cruises, but it will definitely not be powered by the old triple-expansion steam engine.

The Ste. Claire had a role in the movie Transformers 4, where a facsimile of its stern was fashioned out of balsa wood and sculptors recreated its smoke stack right down the rust. Both were blown up.

"We've lost everything in Detroit – Hudson's, Tiger Stadium, Olympia," said Mayer. "How awesome would it be to recreate a Christmas fantasy land on the Boblo boat with Santa on the bandstand? Or the very first black-tie New Year's Eve party on the boat where the winner of a drawing could blow the steam whistle? How awesome would that be?"

Mayer foresees the boat as a nautical and Boblo museum that could host school outings, daytime Halloween parties for kids, nighttime Halloween parties for adults, Easter egg hunts, reunions, graduations, weddings, corporate parties, dance parties for seniors, movie nights where the crowd would sit in Palmer Park and view movies on a blow-up screen on the boat's fourth deck. He can see a carousel similar to the one on Detroit's Riverwalk gracing Palmer Park near the boat's gangplank.

"The possibilities are endless," Mayer said.

"I'm fairly optimistic about this," said Kuffa. "It could bring a lot of tourism to the city."

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