Transportation Commissioner Apologizes for Ferry Kerfuffle

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Ed Schoenfeld/CoastAlaska

Transportation Commissioner Pat Kemp Tuesday apologized for keeping the Marine Transportation Advisory Board out of the loop on the Alaska Class Ferry.

Kemp said he was sorry during a board meeting in Juneau.

"I sincerely apologize for not keeping the board involved or not knowing more about the board. I wasn’t involved with the board before and in fact when this whole thing was going down …," he said. "I wasn’t even commissioner. I was acting commissioner. And I didn’t know the sensitivities of the board. I wasn’t sure how the board operated."

Kemp says he decided to scrap the Alaska Class Ferry design before an October advisory board meeting. But he couldn’t bring it up without Governor Sean Parnell’s approval.

The governor announced plans to design two smaller, cheaper shuttle ships in December. Soon afterward, he moved Kemp from acting to ongoing transportation commissioner.

During yesterday’s meeting, several advisory board members strongly criticized Kemp’s handling of the design change. But Board Chairman Robert Venables accepted the apology.

"I thought that was somewhat unprecedented and very well received. I think the board has had a very warm and close-working relationship with the commissioner’s office and the staff," he said. "And I’m glad to see that bridge-mending underway."

Kemp also asked former Marine Transportation Deputy Commissioner Mike Neussl to resign. He then named Reuben Yost as one of three deputy commissioners. Yost will oversee the ferry system, along with other agencies and some major projects.

Several legislators last week said state law requires such hires to go through the advisory board. Kemp said it’s a different job and not covered by the legal language.

Kemp said he was committed to working with the advisory board.

"I’ll have a close relationship with you. I like ferries. I like marine highway stuff," he said. "I think it’s a great system and I have the utmost confidence in Capt. Falvey and the utmost confidence in Reuben (Yost). And I think we’re going to be fine."

Officials expect some details of the new shuttle ferry’s design to be released within a few weeks.