Despite Low Initial Cost, MV Susitna Won't Sail Kodiak Waters

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

A high-speed catamaran for sale that can carry 20 cars and over 100 people, sounds like it would be an ideal intra-island ferry, serving communities all around Kodiak Island.

Borough Mayor Jerome Selby has occasionally spoken of a desire to have a small ferry that could call on the island’s far-flung communities and lower the cost of transporting people and goods to them. But he’s not sure the MV Susitna, built for the Matanuska-Susitna Borough as a ferry across the Knik Arm, is the right ship for the job – even at the low, low price of free.

-- (Susitna 1 10 sec “First of all we don’t have a dock out there. We’ve been trying to work on the dock issue first. So it’s a little premature of us to be coming up with a vessel when there’s no dock.”)

‘Out there,’ is Antone Larsen Bay, where Selby envisions an intra-island ferry could dock. Even though the bay does ice up during very cold spells, the MV Susitna is capable of limited ice-breaking.

The $80-million ferry was a joint venture between the Mat-Su and the U.S. Navy, which was exploring designs for a new landing craft. It was championed by the late Senator Ted Stevens and built in Ketchikan.

The Susitna has undergone sea trials, but has never even visited Cook Inlet. Selby say given and the size of its crew, the 200-foot Susitna might be overkill for the Kodiak run.

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(Susitna 2 26 sec “We actually saw it while it was under construction in Ketchikan. It’s an interesting kind of leading edge approach to a vessel. We didn’t get too interested initially, because they were looking at several million dollars they were going to try recover for the Mat-Su, I guess now they’ve dropped the price to where they’d like to get rid of it. But in looking at how it would operate, it’s going to have more of a crew than what we had in mind, I think to be required to operate it.”)

Nevertheless, Selby says it might have some interesting possibilities, once it’s been proven:

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(Susitna 3 18 sec “Would really be nice, from my perspective, to have somebody to put the thing to use and really see if this may be the way to go in future. But it was pretty expensive; I mean it had a lot of federal money that went into it.”)

The reason the Mat-Su Borough wanted the Susitna was to serve as a ferry across the Knik Arm until a proposed bridge is built. However, the borough does not have a dock on either side to accommodate the ferry.

Selby says that would be an issue on Kodiak Island as well:

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(Susitna 4 21 sec “If it hangs around, and we can figure out a way how to come up with an answer to the dock issue over there, then I wouldn’t mind taking a closer look at it once we have a place to park it. But right now, like I say, it makes even less sense for us to rush out and try to buy that than it did for them to build it without having a dock for it run back and forth from Mat-Su and Anchorage.”)

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough has listed the fast catamaran ferry with a ship broker, but is willing to transfer it to another government entity for free. But until it sells, the Mat-Su Borough is spending about $90,000 per month while the Susitna sits tied up in Ketchikan’s Wards Cove. ###