

Ferry Chief Hints at Tustumena Replacement Specs

Wednesday, 05 February 2014

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/140204.tusty_replace.mp3{/audio}

Annie Ropeik/KUCB

State officials are hoping the ferry Tustumena's replacement will be bigger, faster and more efficient -- but they also say the current ferry doesn't need to be retired just yet. Tuesday, the ferry system updated the House Transportation Committee.

Captain John Falvey is the general manager of the Alaska Marine Highway System. He was on hand to talk about preliminary designs for the ferry that will replace the aging Tustumena.

But he emphasized that he believes the Tustumena will keep running for a few more years. That's after long delays and complaints about the quality of work done in drydock in 2012.

"We actually got a lot done during that project. We accomplished everything that we needed to accomplish, it just took a little longer. Okay? So what I'd like everyone in the room to know is we've still got some life left in the Tustumena, and reliable life."

For when that life runs out, they're starting to design a new, larger ferry to replace the Tustumena. The ferry travels in the summer from Homer, out the Alaska Peninsula and along the Aleutian Chain, culminating in Unalaska.

Many of the harbors where the 296-foot Tustumena stops are small and shallow, and that can be a challenge for a big boat. Falvey says the 382-foot Kennicott ferry couldn't access five of ports in the Aleutians when it filled in on the Tustumena's route.

"Our first task as we began looking at the design of the ship and the size was, we've got to be able to service every single port that the Tustumena goes to, okay, and was there some way to do that and build a little bigger ship?"

The answer, he says, is yes -- with a 325-foot vessel. It'll also be wider, which Falvey says should give passengers a smoother ride. Other specifications: The new ferry will hold 250 passengers, as opposed to 174. It'll offer more berths to stay in. It'll carry 52 vehicles as opposed to 36, with longer lanes and better loading abilities. And it'll cruise at 15 knots as opposed to 13-point-8.

House Transportation committee member Lynn Gatis, a Wasilla Republican, said she was glad to hear about the planned improvements. She remembered riding the Tustumena as a high school student in Cordova.

"I don't have a weak stomach," she said, "but I know friends of mine that did. And so the fact that it's longer and maybe those folks traveling on it won't have those same rough rides -- so I think that's a wise decision."

Other legislators asked about environmental assessments and cargo arrangements on the new ferry. But Falvey says the project is still in its early stages, and those details will become more clear down the line.

He says in March and April, they'll ask for public input from the towns where the ferry stops, including Homer,

Kodiak and Unalaska.

Any environmental studies will be done around May. They'll only be required if the state gets federal money to build the ferry. Right now, those details haven't been worked out.

Falvey says the state is allocating \$10 million for the design process. That's a quarter of its vessel construction fund.