

# Safety, Financial Questions Kill Paddlewheel Plan

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**LEONARDTOWN, Md.** - Concerns over safety and a lack of financial information derailed plans for Leonardtown to purchase a paddlewheel boat.

Leonardtown Commissioners faced a deadline on Monday, their option to purchase the Black Eyed Susan boat expired Tuesday.

Last October, the town learned the paddlewheel was up for sale. Leonardtown applied for and received a \$100,000 Maryland Heritage Area Authority grant to use toward the purchase of the boat. That grant only covered a portion of the purchase price leaving the town to come up with the rest of the money.

At Monday's meeting, citizens turned out to watch a presentation about plans for the boat and to voice their opinions.

According to the presentation, the boat is structurally sound and in need of only cosmetic repairs. Plans for the boat included public cruises and renting it out for weddings and other events.

Even with the \$100,000 grant, a \$39,000 loss was projected for the first year of operation. Though a surplus of \$90,000 is projected for the second year.

## Financial Risks

Citizens speaking at the meeting were not convinced by the rosy financial picture painted in the report. One man commented, "It's a beautiful boat. But ... and I have a big but... I'm a taxpayer. There's a huge risk. We could lose money. This should be a private ownership. Let somebody else take the risk."

Another man concurred. "Some have said it's a potential investment in the town. As a boat owner I don't buy a boat for investment, I buy for pleasure. As a boat owner I know I'm throwing my money away when use my boat."

Other people thought the boat would allow those without access to boats to enjoy the water and be a big draw for the community.

Several people said the matter should have been put up as a referendum so voters could decide.

## Safety Concerns

Two first responders raised safety concerns. Speaking on behalf of the Leonardtown Volunteer Fire Department, one citizen said, "We don't have a boat. We're looking at getting one. The nearest boats are a 5 minute dispatch and 15 to 20 minutes to get there."

Another first responder agreed. "I've been on Leonardtown Rescue Squad for over 20 years. If somebody has a stroke or a heart attack we can't get to them."

## Commissioners Decide

Council Member Christy Hollander voiced concerns about parking and questioned taking money from Leonardtown's reserve funds to pay for the boat. "We're not here to vote on whether we think it's a good idea. We're here to vote on whether it's good for town business. Is it going to be profitable? Does it make sense? We don't know what that business plan looks like. We didn't have a marketing study done. We didn't receive the financials from the boat's current owner. We don't have enough information make the decision."

Nick Colvin worried that the financial projections did not take into account the lasting effects of COVID. It's a neat potential, but there's a lot of risk."

In the end, the boat purchase was defeated 3 to 2. Council members Mary Slade and Tyler Alt voted in favor of the measure. Nick Colvin, Christy Hollander, and Jay Mattingly voted against it.