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NEWS LOCAL

Norgoma's future may be sunk

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star

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Museum ship Norgoma. (SAULT STAR FILE PHOTO)

Call them the dueling resolutions.

Matthew Shoemaker and Rick Niro call on city staff to pen a report to provide options and costs associated with removing the eyesore M.S. Norgoma from the Bondar Marina and recommend improvements to the marina itself.

Susan Myers and Sandra Hollingsworth counter that the Norgoma is a part of history and a small tourist attraction the city should be funding and wants the cultural advisory board and municipal heritage committee to provide their opinion on the cultural and heritage value of the ship.

It's not the first time the issue of the Norgoma's location or condition have been discussed by city council.

In fact, Shoemaker's research indicates that it was first discussed 17 years ago by the 2002-03 city council when it was decided to allow the ship to remain at its current location and it would be transformed into an interpretive centre.

That never materialized.

Four years later, another call to remove the ship from the city's waterfront led to promises that it would receive a "major spruce up" but again that didn't materialize, he said.

Motions for funding and continued support were discussed in 2007, 2013 and 2014, Shoemaker said, with each occasion council bowing to the ship's not-for-profit organization and giving it an opportunity to make it a success.

"It ain't going to happen," Shoemaker told city council. "It's been given chances for many, many years but the community interest is not there."

Instead, Shoemaker believes that the Bondar Marina can be a showcase for transient travellers and spruced up to be a fledgling and proud waterfront attraction.

"Let's take the actions to support tourism in our community," he said, "not be the ones to kick the problem further into the future."

But an extremely defensive Myers countered that the city relies on small tourist attractions like the Norgoma and Bushplane Museum and the ship should be supported by city council, not sunk.

She accused Shoemaker of not doing his homework and suggested he didn't understand the full history of the Norgoma, how it can fit into the city's position and how the city disposed of it to the non-profit group, leaving them with little to no assistance.

The heated debate pitted Myers against Shoemaker in what Ward 1 Coun. Steve Butland called an "uncomfortable" attack that got a little too personal.

As "a tourism expert" who spent 30 years in the field, Myers argued that the city doesn't own the ship and in fact sold it to the St. Mary's River Marine Centre without providing any financial or in-kind support to the volunteer organization. She suggested it didn't have the right to move it.

"The Bondar Marina was custom designed for the Norgoma to fit," she told council. "It was the idea of a former council to have a Norgoma Marine Park to tell the past and have a vision . . . get you head out of the sand," she said.

Myers chided councillors for spending more effort to sink the ship than help it float.

In its 12 weeks of operation this year it saw 3,700 visitors and employed four students, she said.

"Yes, it needs more renovations but help them."

Butland said other ideas including a restaurant, sinking the boat for divers, scraping it for metal revenue and floating it to Manitoulin Island have all been suggested and failed throughout the years.

Mayor Christian Provenzano said although he agrees culture is important, all cultural organizations are underfunded and the city has to decide where to invest its limited resources.

The ship, he suggested, is not it.

"If it was going to be a success, it would have been by now," he said. "I believe it's in the best interest to move it."

Tom Vair, deputy CAO of community development and enterprise, said that with recent media reports, the city has received correspondence from a person in Chicago who said he was interested in removing the ship and towing it to Chicago to restore it there. He also suggested he would pay the costs to do so.

Provenzano noted that the discussions were early and very preliminary and nothing was set in stone or decided upon.

While the city does not own the Norgoma, it does own the marina where it is docked and the city does have the right to ask that it be moved, Provenzano said.

"It casts a shadow on the Roberta Bondar Pavilion. It does not look nice . . . it is a symbol of decay and not a good symbol in our downtown core," he said.

It's expected that both reports will be presented to council together and a full discussion on the future of the Norgoma will be held at that time.

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