



Facing outrage, Steamship Authority board agrees to outside review



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

A Steamship Authority ferry traveled from Woods Hole to Martha's Vineyard.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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MARTHA'S VINEYARD — Amid public criticism over an unprecedented number of ferry cancellations this year, the Steamship Authority's five-member board voted unanimously Tuesday to hire outside consultants to conduct an independent review of its operations.

The decision came after dozens of residents voiced anger and frustration over mechanical problems that forced some 550 trips to be canceled from Woods Hole to Vineyard Haven during the first four months of the year.

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Reliable ferry service is essential for the well-being of the island's residents and businesses, they said.

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“This is our economy,” said MacAleer Schilcher, 33, of Tisbury, who started a Facebook group for concerned residents that has grown to 1,000 members. “This is our lives.”

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One after another, residents lined up at a microphone in the auditorium at Martha's Vineyard Regional High School to blast the authority not only over the cancellations, but for a lack of timely information about schedule changes.

“If you’re going to cancel our services, you’ve got to tell us,” said Ebba Hierta, 62, of West Tisbury, drawing applause. “Suffice it to say, we have no confidence in your ability.”

Per the board’s vote, a request for proposals to hire a consulting firm to conduct a comprehensive review of the agency will be issued by end of this week.

“I think a lot of things are going to come to light,” Marc N. Hanover, the board’s secretary, said after the meeting.

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Hanover, who first proposed an outside review in April, said the exercise will “pay for itself in the long run” if service improves.

Boats operated by the Steamship Authority, a semi-public agency, last year carried more than 3 million passengers, nearly half a million cars, and about 190,000 trucks to and from Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket, according to statistics [published](#) by the agency.

But the authority has faced an onslaught of public criticism for its performance for the first four months of this year. The 550 trip cancellations from January through April are about 15 times the yearly average, the authority said in a report released last week.

The tally includes some high-profile failures, such as when one ferry lost power, stranding 72 passengers off the island for five hours on March 17.

At Tuesday’s meeting, Robert B. Davis, the authority’s general manager accepted responsibility for the recent failures.

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“I want to offer my sincere apologies for what’s transpired the past couple of months,” said Davis. “It’s embarrassing that we’re in this position.”

Davis has attributed the breakdowns to a series of unrelated mechanical failures on multiple boats, from broken propeller parts to loose wires to failed electrical breakers. Some of the failures temporarily sidelined a vessel that was commissioned only two years ago. Others plagued a boat that recently underwent an \$18 million refurbishment.

In the report released last week, the authority acknowledged that the repeated service disruptions, along with complaints about poor communication and customer service, have eroded customers’ confidence in the agency.

Davis tried to reassure residents that steps are being taken to address the problems. “We’re working on remedies for the summer time and for the fall and going forward,” he said.

The report issued last week also identified several possible steps to improve performance, including the hiring of an outside consultant to review vessel maintenance practices.

Staff would also be required to record specific reasons for cancellations and delays. Communication with the public would also be improved, the report said.

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