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Mechanical issues cause Steamship Authority to cancel two trips Sunday morning



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By John Hilliard

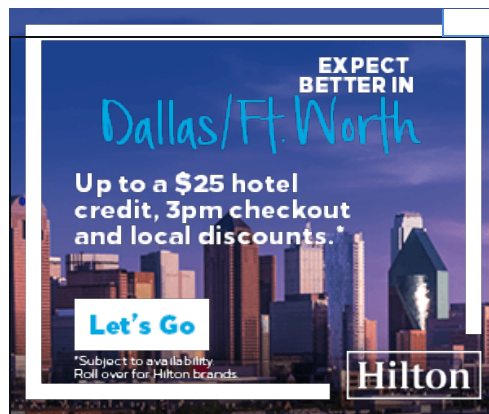
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 08, 2018

The Steamship Authority's cancellation of two trips Sunday added to local frustration with the transportation agency, whose fleet has been plagued with mechanical problems well into the critical summer tourist season for Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. Melinda Loberg, a member of Tisbury's Board of Selectmen, said she receives an e-mail notification from the Steamship Authority whenever a ferry trip is cancelled.

"It's gotten to be almost normal," she said in a phone interview. "I get a text message every time they have a mechanical problem . . . and I say, 'Oh, here they go again.' "

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Sunday's cancellations — which an agency spokesman attributed to an issue with a ferry's propulsion system — come after the Steamship Authority's board hired a consultant last month to conduct an independent review of the agency.

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“The Steamship Authority remains committed to providing reliable and dependable service, and our employees are working hard to identify and correct any issues regarding our operations in a timely manner,” Sean Driscoll, a spokesman for the Steamship Authority, told the Globe in an e-mail.

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On Sunday, the Steamship Authority sent out an e-mail alert reporting that the 5:30 a.m. ferry trip from Woods Hole to Vineyard Haven and the 6:30 a.m. return trip were canceled “due to mechanical issues.”

Both cancellations involved the same ferry, called the Governor, a craft built in 1954 that can carry 256 people and 42 vehicles, [the Globe previously reported](#).

The cancellations came after the ferry's chief engineer investigating an alarm found

a broken wire on a sensor, which would not allow a gear in the vessel's propulsion system to start, Driscoll said in the e-mail.

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No passengers were on board, the bus driver escaped unharmed, and there were no reports of injuries, officials said.

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The wire was reconnected by maintenance staff, the propulsion system was tested and found to be operational, and the Coast Guard cleared the vessel for service, Driscoll said.

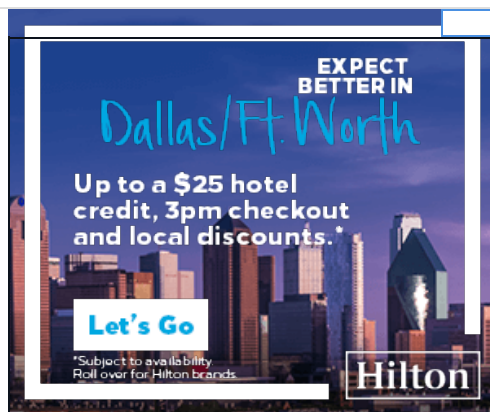
No passengers were on board when the round trip was canceled, Driscoll said.

Some vehicles were moved to the 6 a.m. trip aboard the ferry called Island Home, and a crew was brought in to run extra trips on the freight vessel Sankaty, according to Driscoll.

The cancellations follow other mechanical problems with the ferry service.

On June 27, ferry trips scheduled from Woods Hole to Vineyard Haven were canceled after an emergency generator [on the Island Home failed to activate during a routine test](#), the agency said.

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The Steamship Authority cancelled [two more trips on the same ferry the following day](#), citing a malfunction with the vessel's emergency generator.

And on May 23, the agency canceled trips between [Hyannis and Nantucket when a ferry's engine lost power](#).

[The agency canceled some 550 trips from January through April](#), which was about 15 times its yearly average.

Adding to its headaches: [On Saturday, a Steamship Authority bus was destroyed after it caught fire in a parking lot](#), which also left more than a dozen nearby vehicles damaged by the flames.

Driscoll said there is no update on what caused the fire, which ruined a bus that cost about \$142,000 when it was purchased by the agency in 2016.

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Locals are anxious to see the agency return to reliable service, said Loberg, the Tisbury Board of Selectmen member.

The delays have inconvenienced tourists, whose reservations can be upset by delays in travel arrangements. Local businesses have also been affected by cancellations, which affect the delivery of freight, she said.

"They have work to do," Loberg said of the Steamship Authority. "It's just so highly unusual for this to happen."

In June, the agency's five-member board selected HMS Consulting and Technical to conduct an independent review of the mechanical problems it has faced, Driscoll said.

The review team is in the preparatory stages of the study, which is expected to take 12 weeks, Driscoll said.

[Related: Facing outrage, Steamship Authority board agrees to outside review](#)

State Senator Julian Cyr, who represents Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and part of Cape Cod, said the agency has been making strides in improving its efforts to reach out to the public, including alerting travelers about cancellations and holding more meetings with residents.

But the agency needs to be vigilant about continuing to improve, he said.

"We need to make sure they are getting people to and from the island," Cyr said, noting that the summer tourist season is the biggest time of the year for the local economy.

"This is the lifeline to the islands, and this is an agency that has, until recently, had a really good run," he said.

Related: After an \$18m overhaul, one Steamship Authority boat reeked of sewage. Then things got worse

Cyr, who spoke by phone Sunday from Oak Bluffs, said travelers shouldn't be deterred from planning trips to the islands this summer.

"The islands are open for business," he said.

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