



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



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

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

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF MAY 26, 2018

Under fire for recent breakdowns on ferries to Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, the head of the Steamship Authority this week cast blame on a Rhode Island-based contractor for many of the

mechanical failures and said the agency will demand money from the company for shoddy work. That accusation sets up a potential feud with the contractor, Senesco Marine — one of just two companies the authority regularly relies on for major boat projects — at the moment the high season kicks off this weekend.

Three of the agency's boats were sent to Senesco for long-scheduled upgrades in recent months, including an \$18 million "mid-life" overhaul to a vessel called the Martha's Vineyard. All three subsequently came back with a laundry list of problems, according to Steamship Authority general manager Robert B. Davis.

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Internal documents, obtained by the Globe through a public records request to the quasi-public agency, show that the Martha's Vineyard suffered more than 250 issues, including a pervasive stench of sewage and mechanical problems that Steamship staff attributed to "poor workmanship" and "improperly installed" parts.

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The onslaught of breakdowns began shortly after the problems were discovered. Sometimes multiple failures sprang up in a single week, resulting in more than [550 cancellations](#) so far this year for an agency that ferries 3 million passengers annually to and from the islands.

"The only common denominator would be where the vessel was serviced," said Steamship Authority governing board vice chair Robert R. Jones. "It's just poor workmanship. I've never seen anything like this."

Officials at Senesco and its Staten Island-based parent company, Reinauer Transportation Cos., did not respond to numerous requests for comment.

According to the agency, Senesco sent maintenance crews to a Steamship Authority boatyard in Fairhaven to help fix problems that surfaced this spring after the boats returned to service.

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But the authority now says it will demand reimbursements from the company. Davis said the agency is sorting through which problems were Senesco's responsibility so it can determine a dollar amount to attach. He declined to provide an estimate. He also refused to delineate whether the agency is seeking a refund related to the original contracts, or for costs incurred from the ensuing repairs.

If the two sides can't resolve the issue, it could go to arbitration or to court, according to a provision outlined in the contract for the work on the Martha's Vineyard.

Davis also conceded his agency shares blame for the wave of breakdowns, which included two just this week. The agency, he said, erred by scheduling three of its boats to be sent to a single contractor for major projects, one right after another, under tight deadlines.

He further said the agency underestimated the severity of the issues it discovered when the Martha's Vineyard returned from its \$18 million overhaul with Senesco. He conceded that the Steamship Authority rushed that boat back into service in early March.

Meanwhile, the Steamship Authority is grappling with turnover in its upper ranks. The maintenance supervisor, Peter Schwebach, left in April after nearly three years on the job, saying he was frustrated by what he called "systemic problems" at the agency. Then last week, the longtime chief captain, Charles "Greg" Gifford, announced he plans to retire next month. The agency's general counsel and its human resources director also plan to retire this summer.

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Davis and Jones insisted the timing of each exit was coincidental and not tied to the recent problems. Both the general counsel and the human resources director announced their plans to leave months ago. Gifford, the chief captain, did not respond to a request for comment about his departure.

But Schwebach was sharply critical of the agency. Poor workmanship by Senesco contributed to the recent failures, he said, though the Steamship Authority is not without fault.

“It’s highlighted a lot of issues that need to be fixed,” at the agency, including “structural and organizational problems” as well as inefficient scheduling and purchasing practices within the maintenance department, Schwebach said by phone.

Steamship Authority officials said they were aware of Schwebach’s concerns and agreed there may be inefficiencies within the agency’s own maintenance shop, which is responsible for ship upkeep and routine repairs. Davis said he hopes to address the various issues through a top-to-bottom, outside review set to start in July.

The authority’s five-member governing board last week [voted](#) unanimously to hire a consultant amid backlash from state lawmakers and scores of island residents and business owners, upset by the disruption the cancellations have caused to their lives and the prospect of anxious tourists being scared away this summer.

“It’s getting old,” said Jones. “Sitting on the board and seeing these things, we’re just tired of it.”

But an internal review won’t address what went wrong with Senesco, the North Kingstown, R.I., contractor. The company has been a regular go-to for Steamship Authority boat work in recent years, and, prior to 2018, the agency said it had seen no significant problems with the work.

Davis said the decision to send three boats to the contractor’s shipyard in quick succession may have been a mistake. “The fact that three of the boats were back to back to back going to Senesco, I’m sure that must have stretched their resources,” he said.

If indeed Senesco was overloaded, it was unclear why it bid on the three separate projects. Steamship Authority board meeting minutes show that the company had to ask for at least one extension to complete the promised upgrades.

At the same time Senesco was struggling to finish those projects, it had its hands full with another crisis: Workers welding on a barge in that North Kingstown shipyard in January ignited an explosion that left two workers injured and prompted a probe by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration. That agency later said it didn’t find any violations, but recommended changes to some

company practices.

But as the three Steamship Authority boats began returning to the water this spring, the problems quickly mounted.

Agency workers counted the 250 separate issues on the Martha's Vineyard alone, despite the millions spent for Senesco to refurbish the entire boat, installing a new pilot house and navigational equipment, and conducting a passenger-cabin facelift.

In one high-profile incident in mid-March, the boat [lost power](#), stranding 72 passengers for five hours. Other boats, too, were showing signs of problems.

At one point, as many as five of the agency's 10 ships were out of commission this spring. In addition to the three that were sidelined after returning from Senesco, a fourth boat, the [Woods Hole](#), ran aground in mid-March and began malfunctioning soon after that. And a fifth vessel, the Governor, was unavailable because it is considered unreliable in colder months.

So would the Steamship Authority hire Senesco again?

Jones, the board vice-chair, expressed doubt.

"This is obviously going to strain our relationship with Senesco," he said.

A boat-by-boat look at the Steamship Authority's troubles this year

Plagued by a slew of mechanical problems aboard its boats over the past two months, the Steamship Authority has cancelled hundreds of trips to and from Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. At some points, as many as five of the Steamship Authority's 10 boats were unavailable. This list shows, in order, the boats with the most mechanical cancellations. Trip cancellation figures are through the end of April 2018. Capacity figures include both passengers and crew.

MARTHA'S VINEYARD

Mechanical issues: Yes

What preceded breakdowns: \$18m mid-life refurbishment at contractor Senesco

Year built: 1993

Person capacity: 1,274

Vehicles capacity: 54

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



WOODS HOLE

Mechanical issues: Yes

What preceded breakdowns: Ran aground

Year built: 2016

Person capacity: 453

Vehicles capacity: 55

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



ISLAND HOME

Mechanical issues: Yes

What preceded breakdowns: \$2m overhaul at contractor Senesco

Year built: 2007

Person capacity: 1,210

Vehicles capacity: 76

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



NANTUCKET

Mechanical issues: Yes

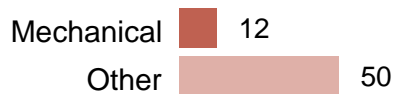
What preceded breakdowns: \$1.6m overhaul at contractor Senesco

Year built: 1974

Person capacity: 768

Vehicles capacity: 50

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



KATAMA

Mechanical issues: Yes

What preceded breakdowns: Unknown

Year built: 1982

Person capacity: 150

Vehicles capacity: 39

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



EAGLE

Mechanical issues: Yes

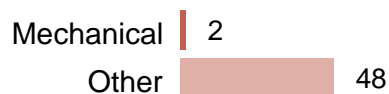
What preceded breakdowns: Unknown

Year built: 1987

Person capacity: 768

Vehicles capacity: 52

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



GOVERNOR

Mechanical issues: No*

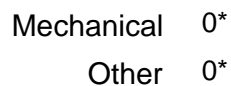
What preceded breakdowns: N/A

Year built: 1954

Person capacity: 256

Vehicles capacity: 42

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



Note: * This boat was unavailable recently because it is considered unreliable during winter.

GAY HEAD

Mechanical issues: No

What preceded breakdowns: N/A

Year built: 1981

Person capacity: 147

Vehicles capacity: 39

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



IYANOUGH

Mechanical issues: No

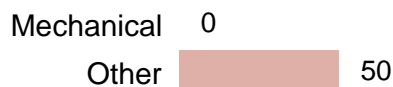
What preceded breakdowns: N/A

Year built: 2006

Person capacity: 400

Vehicles capacity: null

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



SANKATY

Mechanical issues: No

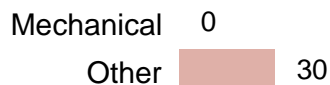
What preceded breakdowns: N/A

Year built: 1981

Person capacity: 300

Vehicles capacity: 39

Trips cancelled because of mechanical issues versus weather/other factors:



SOURCE: Steamship Authority, United States Coast Guard

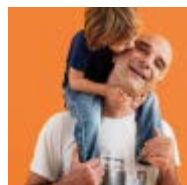
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