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RECORD RUN
Ichiro brings new glory
to 'Gorgeous George.' S1



SUPER DANE
Soon-to-be-single 'party
prince' in Toronto. AL2

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COMMENT

ONTARIO 



The Spirit of Ontario ferry leaves Toronto for its last trip to Rochester, N.Y., on Sept. 7.

GLENN LOWSON / NATIONAL POST

We need to keep the ferry afloat

ALBERT J. SIMONE
in Rochester, N.Y.

Some Torontonians recently cancelled their weekend plans to lodge at a bed and breakfast in the Rochester, N.Y., area. The Canadian guests had planned to travel by way of the high-speed ferry, the Spirit of Ontario, which began operations between Toronto and Rochester on June 18. But the ferry, purchased for US\$42.5-million, is now sitting idle in the Port of Rochester as its operators try to work out the unanticipated financial and bureaucratic challenges they've been faced with. Those challenges must be overcome to ensure the Spirit of Ontario can again take its place as an engine of economic growth for both sides of Lake Ontario.

The entrepreneurs that operate the Spirit of Ontario, Canadian American Transportation Systems (CATS), have done a good job promoting their service. Despite the delay in launching the ferry between Rochester and Toronto, caused by an unfortunate docking accident in New York City that sidelined the ship for repairs, CATS has carried 140,000 passengers in 80 days — 1,750 per day.

CATS' initial concept was premised on the idea that Americans and Canadians would respond positively to the opportunity of travelling back and forth across the lake, reducing traffic on our roads and pollution. Yet proving the concept a viable alternative to road travel has not been enough. Unforeseen bureaucratic hurdles have hobbled the success of the enterprise.

To make the Spirit of Ontario a financial success, CATS must be able to transport trucks across the lake. Its business plan included this option. But U.S. Customs, on the basis of security concerns, had blocked Canadian trucks from being transported across Lake Ontario to Rochester and have just recently conceded that some trucks can

be transported.

It is imperative, however, that U.S. Customs permit the ferry to carry all commercial trucks without restrictions and tour buses to supplement passenger traffic that, taken together, is worth an estimated US\$18,000 a day. CATS' business plan depends on these funds. U.S. Customs and Border Protection should help facilitate an arrangement that allows the ferry to carry all manner of vehicles while addressing any legitimate security concerns.

But that alone won't start the ferry's propellers turning again. Canada Customs has imposed an unanticipated fee on the operation amounting to \$2,500 per day. Moreover, pilot fees paid to

The Spirit of Ontario is a wonderful tool for economic development

Toronto authorities who help the ferry dock in that city were much higher than expected, totalling about \$5,200 per day. To these troubles have been added the inconvenience to passengers caused by the lack of a permanent ferry terminal in Toronto.

CATS states that the higher than expected fees in Canada and bureaucratic problems on the U.S. side of the border led its Australian-based financial backer, Export Finance and Insurance Corp., to deny the company access to \$1.5-million in loans — money needed until the trucking, customs, pilot and terminal issues are resolved.

Lost in all the government and financial wrangling is the fact that the Spirit of Ontario, nicknamed the Breeze, is a wonderful tool for economic development and

quality of life for both Ontario and the Rochester area. Torontonians can visit our restaurants, golf courses, wineries and more in the Finger Lakes region, while we can take advantage of your shopping, world-class theatre and sports. Furthermore, the ferry was attracting people from throughout Ontario, the Northeast United States and beyond.

A study commissioned by CATS concluded that after less than three months on the water, the ferry generated US\$22.7-million worth of jobs, increased wages, media exposure and savings to government agencies — even at that early stage in the venture.

To ensure the Spirit of Ontario cruises again, concrete steps must be taken.

■ First, the issue surrounding truck access must be resolved. It is an essential component of the business plan and U.S. Customs must remove all restrictions on commercial trucks. Canada can help in this regard by working with U.S. customs officials.

■ The customs fees on both sides of the lake must be reduced, if not waived. These fees, essentially a tax, pale in comparison to the tourism dollars that will be brought in by the ferry.

■ The Australian financiers must be persuaded to free the \$1.5-million in loans. These contingency funds are necessary for a business that is still in its infancy.

■ Investors on both sides of the lake should step up to provide investment capital or loans to assist this venture in the start-up phase.

Certainly, there are many hurdles to overcome. Yet so many obstacles have already been cleared. In a short time, it has already been proven that tourists enjoy using the Spirit of Ontario.

Let's cut the red tape. Let's build community spirit for both regions. Let's unite these two Great Lake cities once and for all.

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