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Residents dislike Ducks

By Miriam Hill

About 100 people who came to a meeting at the Free Library Wednesday night all had one thing to say: They don't want duck boats on the Schuylkill.

"I don't think you've heard a single person welcome a duck tour on the Schuylkill, and I hope that's the message you'll take back. We don't want it," Jovida Hill told Philadelphia's Managing Director Richard Negrin near the end of the evening.

The Schuylkill Park Alliance, an advocacy group, hosted the meeting to let residents share their thoughts on moving the duck boats from the Delaware River to the Schuylkill in the spring.

The proposed shift follows a July 7 duck boat accident on the Delaware that killed two people. In October, Mayor Nutter and Ride the Ducks, the Georgia company that operates the amphibious vehicles, announced plans to have them return to the water on the Schuylkill instead of on the Delaware.

Since then, the city has said it is seeking proposals from Ride the Ducks and from other companies because the law requires a competitive process. Those proposals are due next week, and Negrin said it is possible no one will be selected at all.

"I want to be really clear," Negrin said. "No decision has been made. There is no plan at this point."

Many speakers feared the duck vehicles will disrupt the quiet Schuylkill Park, which has become so popular that people used its recreational path for more than 2,200 trips daily this summer.

Negrin and Ride the Ducks officials had previously described building a trench that will go under the recreational path, but on Wednesday, he said none of that was certain. The proposed new route would go through Old City, down the Parkway and enter the Schuylkill near the Art Museum.

The Delaware River tour, which was suspended after the accident, includes loud music, and passengers "quacking" with kazoos.

"Who wants to listen to that when you're running and trying to ride your bike or when you're lying on the grass and reading your book," asked Ginny Nelson, who lives near the park.

Negrin said city officials had written the request for proposals to require that a tour

operator minimize noise, but Kathryn Streeter Lewis said such language only proves that "there will be some noise."

Neal Nandi, who works for The Constitutional Walking Tour, a local tour company interested in getting the ducks contract, said the city had initially given potential bidders only 15 business days to analyze the opportunity. The deadline has since been extended by three days, but Nandi said it is not enough time to analyze a complicated project, raising questions about whether city officials really wanted companies besides Ride the Ducks to apply.

Brian Abernathy, Negrin's chief of staff, said such time frames were typical in the city. Philadelphia officials expect to name the companies that bid Jan. 9. Officials from the Managing Director's Office, and the departments of Commerce, Parks and Recreation, and Transportation will be involved in picking the winner.

Carol Katarsky, who also lives near the park, said the duck boats would disturb a beloved park while doing nothing for the neighborhood near the Art Museum. Passengers will not get off the vehicles to shop or eat in the area, she said.

"Why are we being asked to absorb this with no benefit to our community," she asked.

Negrin responded that "People like the ducks." But he also said the city was open to something other than the ducks that allowed people to see Philadelphia from the water. The Schuylkill Park Alliance does offer boat tours of that river, but they are nowhere near as frequent as the duck trips.

Residents at the meeting worried that the estimated 60 duck vehicles a day would clog traffic around Eakins Oval.

On July 7, a K-Sea Transportation Partners tug pushing a barge owned by the city crashed into a duck boat on the Delaware River, killing Hungarian tourists Szabolcs Prem, 20, and Dora Schwendtner, 16.

The duck boat had stopped on the Delaware after its captain saw smoke coming from the engine. Capt. Gary Fox radioed for help and issued warnings over marine channels, saying he had no power. He also asked the tug to change course. The tug's first mate was at the helm. He has refused to be interviewed by the NTSB.

The Coast Guard is waiting for results of a National Transportation Safety Board investigation into the July 7 accident. The NTSB investigation is not expected to be completed until next year. If the NTSB determines that the duck vehicles' design contributed to the passenger deaths, the Coast Guard could request changes to their design or declare them unsafe and bar them from the water.

In August, Congressman Bob Brady said he believed the duck vehicles were "not safe for either our streets or our waterways and urged the Coast Guard to deny Ride the Ducks

permits.

Lawyers for the accident victims have argued that canopies on the boat hindered passengers' escapes, but Ride the Ducks spokesman Bob Salmon said the canopies protected passengers from the impact of the barge. He also said the Coast Guard already had approved the Ducks plans to return to the Delaware but the company wanted to switch to the Schuylkill instead.

"The question remains why did these calls go unanswered and why won't the first mate cooperate in the investigation," Salmon said.

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