Port commission hires firm to determine boat’s condition

By BOBBY LAMB
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The Greater Baton Rouge Port Commission decided Monday to hire an independent engineering firm to determine the condition and value of a port-owned tow boat that was leased for two years to a Donaldsonville firm that employs one of the port commission members.

Port Attorney Steve Glusman said the lease on the boat, known as the MV/10, requires that it be returned in as good a condition as when it was leased, less normal wear and tear. To make that judgment, the port must first determine if any change in the condition of the boat was due to normal wear and tear, or lack of maintenance, he said.

The survey will be conducted for a cost of no more than $800 by McNally Engineering Co., which performed a similar survey on the boat in 1985.

The boat was leased from August 1986 through October 1988 for $500 per month to Point Houmas Fleetings Inc. and an apparent successor firm, Point Houmas Marine Services Inc. Several commissioners said they learned from newspaper reports Monday that Commissioner Calvin Ishmael, who has been on the commission since May 1986, is an employee of Point Houmas Marine. Ishmael’s sister-in-law, Gloria Baker Henry, signed the lease with the port as owner of Point Houmas.

Point Houmas pulled the MV/10 ashore around mid-year 1988, removed the vessel’s mechanical parts and offered the port $5,000 for the boat as salvage.

However, the port commission decided to sell the MV/10 through a public bid process. The high bid of $7,700 was submitted by Big River Leasing Co., an apparently unincorporated firm that lists Ishmael’s sister-in-law as an agent and secretary-treasurer.

The bid process was delayed in February after Phillip Wright, a prospective bidder, raised questions about the boat’s current condition and potential conflicts of interest on the commission.

It also became unclear whether all potential bidders knew that the MV/10’s mechanical parts were stored in a machine shop and were part of the proposed sale.

Commissioner Charles D’Agostino said Ishmael’s employment by Point Houmas should have been disclosed.

Commissioner Robert S. Miller said he shared other

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Former Port Commissioner and Engineering Committee Chairman Ray Boudreaux attended the meeting to back up Ishmael’s comments. He said the Burnside Terminal, which used the boat until 1985, returned it to the port in manufacturer was unable to keep pace with the subcontractor. Therefore, the company is using only one crew that will require 167 days.

The testing is an expense the port has incurred to insure quality work is being done. Thomas was told to determine if other sources of paint can be found to speed up the process.

The port also approved tariff changes at its docks and concurred in changes presented by Ormet Corp. for the Burnside Terminal, which is leased from the port.
commissioners’ concerns about the “humiliation” and “appearance of impropriety” surrounding the MV/10 lease and proposed sale, but said the port should first resolve whether Point Houmas lived up to its lease responsibilities. Within the context of that inquiry, other questions will resolve themselves, he said.

Commissioner Cyril Vetter said members must be aware that they are “public stewards.”

“If you’re on the port commission, you ought not do business with the port. We have to conduct the commission’s business in the glare of public scrutiny,” Vetter said.

Ishmael said he’s been working on the river for 25 years and didn’t think to disclose his association with Point Houmas.

Ishmael also discounted Wright’s assertions that the boat was in good shape when it was leased in 1986 to Point Houmas.

Calling the MV/10 a 31-year-old “sad wreck,” Ishmael said the vessel “was not a cream puff then and it is not a cream puff now.”

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Former Port Commissioner and Engineering Committee Chairman Ray Boudreaux attended the meeting to back up Ishmael’s comments. He said the Burnside Terminal, which used the boat until 1985, returned it to the port in poor condition.

“It was a piece of junk to us,” Boudreaux said.

He said he personally contacted Point Houmas about taking the boat off the port’s hands.

Ishmael lashed out at a Morning Advocate reporter and commissioners, whom he said are “surrogates” doing the bidding of former port commissioner and Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce executive Bill Little. Wright sent a letter to Little about the MV/10 in February, thinking Little still served on the commission.

In other action, the commission approved an additional $13,000 for quality control testing on the port’s $8.5 million dock expansion project. The original estimate for testing services was $24,047.

Port Engineer K.J. Thomas said tests for painting were originally based on estimates that a painting subcontractor would operate with three or more crews over a 60-day period. Thomas said a pigment ingredient for the paint is in short supply worldwide and the manufacturer was unable to keep pace with the subcontractor. Therefore, the company is using only one crew that will require 187 days.

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