

Notes from Meeting with PHMC Commissioner Cal Pifer

February 7, 2024, Hagen History Center

Present: Cal Pifer, Katie Zawrotniak, Steven Perry, & Ginny Sivak

Why did PHMC make the decision to end their relationship with FNL?

The situation between PHMC and FNL was not a good one. The contract that just expired was riddled with problems. PHMC has concerns about FNL's current ability to fundraise. Cal felt that PHMC's insistence that FNL could only fundraise for sailing programs and not directly for Niagara was a big part of this issue.

PHMC decided they had two options for Niagara's future: divest the ship or fully fund it. PHMC decided they want to keep the ship as it is part of their only holdings in Erie county.

The PHMC commissioners were notified after the decision to take full control of Niagara was made. The decision was made by those further down the chain of command. Decisions about individual site budgets happen at the management level at PHMC. The Commissioners are there for Governance - not management. The management staff was well within their purview to decide to increase Niagara's budget.

We asked why there was not a plan in place for the transition. The idea of ending the contract had been discussed in the last PHMC commissioners' meeting before Thanksgiving. FNL was not officially notified of the ending of the contract until mid-December.

A major donor in the local area was not interested in taking over the responsibility of Niagara unless the Commonwealth would help support it financially.

PHMC wants FNL as an associate group (the old model prior to 2010). This would mean FNL would provide auxiliary fundraising. FNL would not be involved in management. According to state code, PHMC needs an entity to act as an associate group so if FNL doesn't accept that, they will have to find another non-profit to do so.

How will PHMC fund the operation and repairs of Niagara?

PHMC's operating budget for Niagara has been static at \$350,000/year since before 2008. They will add another half million dollars to that since the \$350k isn't enough to be able to afford a pro crew. The additional half million is not part of the Keystone funding. Money will be pulled from other sites budgets to fund Niagara. We asked if there was a budget available for Niagara for 2024. Cal has not seen one.

PHMC believes that having the state fund more of the costs for Niagara's operation and repairs would be a good thing for taxpayers.

The work that PHMC is planning to do is not a full mid-life refit. They plan to address the stem, shafts, engines, and props. Cal was not aware of plans to raise the deck as requested in the last refit request by FNL. That does not mean that it will not be in the shipyard repair scope. PHMC needs to figure out a more efficient procurement process as their current system is long

and drawn out. They also do not know what shipyard they will go to. Cal would like to see Niagara go to Mystic so that people could watch the work while it is there for 2 years.

What is happening with hiring a new crew for Niagara? And what will her sailing seasons look like?

PHMC wants Niagara to sail but that they want Niagara in Erie more. Shipyard will dictate what sailing will look like.

Cal has been advising PHMC about the needs of Niagara, based on his experience as a Niagara volunteer crew member. He had suggested that PHMC require a square-rig licensed captain. He said there was a job offer made for a captain, it was turned down, and it was a local person who was offered the job. Cal was not aware that the captain position or any other crew positions had been posted yet.

Walter Rybka was being contracted for technical advice about Niagara. Andrea Lowery said it was a “formal agreement.”

We asked what happens if PHMC goes 6 months without managing to hire a captain. Cal said that would be a point where the commissioners might step in and become involved.

Why has PHMC stated that Niagara will not be participating in the Navy’s 250th celebration in Philadelphia?

We also asked about the decision to not take Niagara to Philadelphia for the Navy’s 250th celebration in 2025. That reason is the cost of getting Niagara there and because the Navy is not providing funds for that. When asked about the possibility of Niagara already being on the East Coast for shipyard, he said Philadelphia could be a possibility.

Does PHMC know the value of volunteers and the community? Why won’t they agree to hold a public forum in Erie?

We left a copy of the statistics for Niagara ship volunteers hours and their value.

We asked Cal to support our call for a public forum so that other volunteers and community members could ask their questions about the future of Niagara. Ginny gave him a copy of the formal letter sent to Andrea Lowery in December 2023 and her email reply that mentioned nothing about a public forum, one way or the other. Cal offered to bring this up with PHMC. He said he would get back to us the next week.