

# Opinion

## MY VIEW

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You may not have thought much about this, but the Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket Steamship Authority has been gaining traction for the last couple of years. Allow me to give you a progress report.

Created by the Massachusetts Legislature in the Enabling Act of 1960, the SSA has the mission of providing for adequate transportation of persons and necessities of life for the islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. It operates as a quasi-public agency, with legal authority to issue bonds ultimately backed by the Commonwealth. Operating deficits must be borne proportionately by the towns.



### My View

By H. Flint Ranney

There haven't been any deficits since 1962, making it the only public transportation agency in the country to perform so well for 45 years.

The SSA is governed by five members, one from each of the ports it serves, with the two islands sharing 70 percent of the vote on each decision.

Accountability for the agency's operation lies with its unpaid members, and ultimately by their appointing authorities: County Commissioners or Boards of Selectmen for each port, except for New Bedford, whose member is appointed by the city's mayor.

Recent legislative pressure by one of our eight unions to add the state Secretary of Transportation as a sixth member will hopefully fade into the woodwork as an unnecessary and regionally opposed intrusion by the state into a stable and successful operation. Affiliating the SSA with the

Boston bunch that has given us the Big Dig sounds like the worst idea of the year, not counting some of those in Town Meeting, if you get my drift.

The boat line receives no federal, state, or local subsidies, and all expenses are paid through collection of fares for passengers, autos, and trucks. All of our service is paid for by those who receive it, though we are fortunate occasionally to receive federal or state grants to help with specific projects, such as a new boat or improvements to port facilities. As you might expect, the vast majority of our costs lie in wages, maintenance, fuel, bond interest and insurance. As everywhere, costs always seem to goup and rates generally have to go up to meet them.

In order to mitigate the need for raising rates, management has adjusted boat speeds and efficiency of scheduling, saving nearly a million dollars last year, and has recently embarked on a program of accepting paid advertising for space on boats and in terminals.

For five years we had an unsatisfactory experience with a new fast ferry, the *Flying Cloud*. The SSA was slow to accept that she was a lemon, and some people thought this was because she wouldn't carry dogs. But after our own employees began avoiding travel on this unreliable vessel, we replaced the troubled British engines with American-made diesels, and the boat operated successfully and profitably all during the summer of 2006. Retired from service in January 2007, she was declared surplus and put up for sale.

Though no firm buyers have yet stepped forward, having operated so well for nine months she is considered to be far more salable now, and there have been several promising nibbles.

Our new fast ferry, the *Iyanough* (pronounced "eye YAN oh"), has proven that the SSA can do something right. A larger vessel with four MTU Detroit Diesel engines, a proven In-Cat design, and constructed by the highly experienced Gladding-Hearn Shipyard, she has been finding great passenger acceptance and is demonstrating proven reliability. She began service for the season on March 28, 2007. Usually crossing the Sound at 35 knots, this great boat has yet (fingers crossed) to miss a trip for mechanical reasons. If she could only go that fast in Hyannis and

Nantucket harbors, we could cut the trip time to 33 minutes! Oh wait, the dogs (now allowed) might get dizzy.

Following lengthy discussions that took almost as long as building the *Iyanough*, management proposed that we offer new and improved 10-ride passenger-friendly ticket books for both the fast and the slow ferries.

These books are now transferable, have no expiration date, and at an 18 percent discount from full fares offer the least expensive public transportation to or from Nantucket. I suggest you go get some of them — they're small and they'll go fast — sales are up 160 percent over the old ones.

A planned and well-deserved mid-life refurbishment of the 29-year old *MV Nantucket* is scheduled to start in November, with the boat returning to service in April 2008. New seating, new windows, an enlarged lunch counter area, and air conditioning are in the works. We're also working on self-cleaning new bathrooms. The *MV Eagle* will be next to receive major upgrading, over the winter of 2008-2009.

Nat Lowell, your SSA Port Council member, and I have been working closely with management to transform a somewhat bureaucratic government agency into one where good customer relations and hospitable, friendly service are the norm. Much progress has been made over the past couple of years as the SSA displaces the old, "We've always done it that way," with out-of-the-box modern world thinking.

Old ways are going, new technology is here: onboard wi-fi service for all vessels now provides Internet connectivity almost all the way across Nantucket Sound; and bugs are being worked out of a new automobile check-in system at the terminals making it simple to make a reservation on line and take your auto on the boats with less paperwork.

We've even installed a couple of video games for the kids on the *Eagle*!

Drive up, check in, smile at the terminal guy (or gal), drive on, listen for the *Nobska* whistle, and enjoy your trip. ■

*A summer and year-round resident of Nantucket since 1935, H. Flint Ranney was appointed by the County Commissioners as the Nantucket member of the Steamship Authority in August of 2004.*

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## GREY MATTER by James Cennamo

