Council OKs ferry loan amid rancor

FERRY Refuses vote delay, but leaves Duffy options
LEAD 9-0 vote calls for dust wipes, affects thousands
PROTEST Some critics call ship 'a ferry bad idea'

Mark Herrick addresses City Council on Tuesday night. He said the vote on the ferry should be delayed, a proposal that was not followed. The council voted 7-2 to approve additional money for the ferry.

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What a way to end an administration.

With a handful of protesters outside City Hall and a crowded chambers inside, City Council on Tuesday night approved two controversial pieces of legislation: a lead abatement plan for thousands of city homes and $11.5 million to keep solvent the fledgling high-speed ferry.

The meeting came 11 days before Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. retires after 12 years in office and came as City Council hurried to put its final stamp on two of the more critical issues facing Rochester.

For an outgoing City Council, often criticized for engaging in little public debate, Tuesday's meeting also brought something else: suspense.

And that caused the meeting, according to council members' memories, to be one of the longest, if not the longest, of Johnson's administration.

By about 10 p.m., the council voted 9-0 to approve lead paint legislation.

How they voted

- Approved borrowing $11.5 million to help fund the high-speed ferry to Toronto
- Approved lead paint abatement legislation aimed at making Rochester lead-free by 2010
- Approved spending $200,000 for the 2006 MusicFest

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Douglas said the week delay on getting financial approval for the loan is worth it in order to build consensus. The two dissenting votes on the loan were from Councillor Wade Norwood and Brian Curran.

Douglas said, “It’s worth the (delay) to try to take this additional risk because I think a project of this nature needs not only community support, but it also needs support of council. It needs support of the ferry board, it needs support of the mayor.”

Rough waters

While the ferry loan would keep it stable for the time being, Duffy will be saddled with the ship’s long-term viability. But until this week, he hasn’t participated in the debate, except for saying he wants the ferry to succeed. And he still hasn’t said whether he supports the $3 million loan.

But others were more opinionated. A small group of protesters standing in the cold and snow outside City Hall Tuesday condemned city leaders for wanting to spend more on the ferry.

The group of protesters, which called itself Rochester-Watchdog, carried signs with messages such as “$3 Million More? Sounds Like a Ferry Bad Idea,” and “Vote No! to More Ferry Debt.”

“Let’s not saddle our children and grandchildren with additional debt,” said Darrell Brandt, 34, of Webster. “We have too many needs that need to be addressed rather than loaning money on an $3.3 million bond.”

Tuesday’s vote was the latest in a ferry saga marred with setbacks and financial dilemmas.

The original private owners shut down ferry service after a few months of operation in September 2004. The city then bought the ship out of foreclosure in February.

The city borrowed a $40 million loan to buy it and set up separate ferry board to oversee operations. The board then hired the private company, Bay Ferries Great Lakes, to manage the ship.

But despite Johnson’s assurances that the ship wouldn’t lean on taxpayers, officials this year struggled to build ridership after a limited marketing campaign and a delayed start in June.

Johnson capitulated last week, announcing that the ship had polled through its reserves, lost $10 million this year and needed another $11.5 million to pay the bills.

Johnson warned the council’s compromise Tuesday shouldn’t delay the issuance of the loan indefinitely.

“I’ve made it clear, we can’t wait,” he said. “We have to move forward as soon as possible.”

Lead debate

While the ferry’s future has been a hotly contested topic, the debate over the city’s role in cleaning up dangerous levels of lead paint has carried on for years with little resolution.

While lead was banned from house paint in 1978, lead-based paint remains in thousands of Rochester homes. If ingested in paint chips or dust, lead can cause a host of health problems, especially in young children.

Even though City Council on Tuesday voted unanimously to approve lead paint legislation, it was not without disagreement.

Council members wrangled over whether to include dust wipes as part of the initial inspection process. Without the dust wipes, inspections would have centered on visible checks. “Using the dust wipe samples ensures that instead of a visual inspection, we really know where the lead is,” said Derrick Hasle, executive director of the Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning.

Includes reporting by staff writer Alan Morrell.