



## **TOURISM: Maid of the Mist open to bidders**

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For the first time in its history, the Maid of the Mist will have to fend off competitors to hold onto the right to run boat tours in the Niagara River.

Ontario Tourism Minister Monique Smith announced Wednesday the Niagara Parks Commission will solicit competing bids from companies interested in leasing the property needed to provide the tours.

"For once, the taxpayers have won. It's unbelievable," said Bob Gale, the former commissioner whose concerns about the attempt to renew the lease in 2008 led to a year and a half of intense scrutiny for Niagara Parks.

The Liberal government's direction to the parks commission stems from its reaction to the recent scandal at eHealth Ontario, where it was revealed the electronic health records agency issued more than \$1 billion in untendered contracts.

After the eHealth scandal, Premier Dalton McGuinty announced a new policy aimed at opening government-issued contracts to competitive bids more regularly.

"We think that this process aligns itself well with that," Smith said in an interview just hours after she recommended cabinet not give its approval to the deal the parks commission negotiated in 2008 with the Maid of the Mist Steamboat Co.

"I think this is the appropriate course," Smith said. "It ensures all interested parties get the opportunity to submit proposals in a fair and open competition."

Parks commission chairman Jim Williams said his board will abide by the order.

Officials with the Maid of the Mist Steamboat Co., issued a statement calling it "very disappointing that the Ontario government has placed its longstanding and mutually beneficial working relationship with the Niagara Parks Commission in jeopardy."

"For the immediate future, the Maid of the Mist will continue working with the Niagara Parks Commission under the existing lease according to its terms," said Tim Ruddy, vice president of Maid of the Mist Steamboat Co.

Ruddy added the company will take "whatever actions are necessary" to continue operating.

The Maid of the Mist lease has been controversial since April 2008 when the 12-member parks commission voted to extend it. Then-commissioner Gale objected to renewing it before finding out if another company might pay more for the right to run tours. Two others, including Ripley's Entertainment and Atlanta-based Alcatraz Media had said they were interested.

On the U.S. side, William Windsor, the father of the owner of Alcatraz Media, Inc., a Georgia-based company, had asked the New York state Comptroller's Office to look into the lease renewal process.

Maid of the Mist attorney Marc Brown said in May that the Comptroller's Office had rejected Windsor's complaints.

"There has been no finding of improper conduct by the government agencies or Maid regarding Maid's lease as a result of Mr. Windsor's complaint and protest," Brown said at the time.

In Canada, Gale's complaint to Ontario's integrity commissioner led to an eight-month investigation, two government reviews and Smith's order for the parks commission to take a second look at its 2008 decision.

When commissioners reviewed that decision in September, they reached the same conclusion — extend the Maid lease — and asked the Liberal cabinet to approve it.

There is a provision in the current lease for the Maid of the Mist to continue on a month-to-month basis. If the Maid company lost the contract, it could continue business until the winner takes over.

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