

# Duluth News Tribune

## Software streamlines inspections for ferry

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Duluth News Tribune - 07/07/2008

With the help of software developed in Duluth, the Madeline Island Ferry Line is charting new waters as the first commercial carrier in the nation to electronically file the documentation it needs to operate in the good graces of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Lt. Kevin Broyles said the ferry service's MV Nichevo II recently made history when federal officials signed off on the vessel's use of a system developed in Duluth by Sinex Solutions to electronically submit all the information needed to comply with the Coast Guard's Streamlined Inspection Program, commonly referred to as SIP in maritime circles.

Broyles explained that SIP allows fleet operators to perform their own vessel inspections and report their own efforts to maintain the safety, security and structural integrity of watercraft. Where the program is successful, Broyles said a ship's entire crew collaborates to ensure compliance with Coast Guard standards.

"We're training our employees to look at our equipment and operations with the eyes of a Coast Guard inspector," said Mike Radtke, marine operations manager for the Madeline Island Ferry Line.

The ferry line has considered participation in the Coast Guard's SIP system for the past few years, but Radtke said the daunting paperwork load associated with the program gave him pause.

"Sometimes, the Coast Guard's use of the term 'streamlined' seemed like a bit of a misnomer," he said.

John Groundwater, executive director of the Passenger Vessel Association, a trade group representing about 400 North American carriers, said his organization has supported the SIP program for years, as a means to elevate safety in the industry. But he said the paperwork involved serves as "an impediment to many small operators entering the program."

Broyles acknowledged that SIP's burden of reports and documentation is often considerable.

"It can be a pain in the butt," he said.

Radtke said software developed by Barry Sinex of Duluth vastly simplifies the process. For the past few years, the Madeline Island Ferry Line has used Sinex's programs to manage the upkeep of its four-vessel fleet. Now, the same software also will be used to communicate with the Coast Guard and keep the operation in compliance with SIP.

"We've been involved with Barry from day one, and the product he developed has been a great tool for us," Radtke said. "It has made a whole lot of our maintenance functions more manageable."

The Sinex Solutions software package already is in use by about 70 fleets, ranging in size from two vessels to more than 100. But Barry Sinex said having the Coast Guard's acceptance of the platform as a means of filing SIP documentation could broaden his company's market.

"This is a huge step for us," said Sinex, who initially developed maintenance software for the airline industry before branching into maritime operations.

The Passenger Vessel Association apparently sees potential in Sinex's latest software package, as well.

"We're working with Sinex Solutions to fashion an agreement so we could offer this product to our members on an endorsed basis. We think it may make the SIP program more attractive for some operators to enter," Groundwater said. He said the program also helps passenger lines manage routine maintenance duties.

Broyles said the program promises to help not only its users but the Coast Guard, too. He said the Madeline Island Ferry Service has granted his agency access to much of its database, providing a useful window into its operations.

Sinex said this window can be made wide or narrow, according to the wishes of clients.

“I think this is the future for the SIP program,” Broyles said. “It’s a lot easier for us and for vessel operators, too.”

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