

# Trillium ferry gets tuned up after 107 years spent on Toronto's waterfront

The city's biggest ferry is one of five that connects the downtown to the islands.



The Trillium, Toronto's 107-year-old ferry, sits in dry dock at the mouth of the Keating Channel.  
RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR

By: BEN SPURR – Transportation Reporter

For a vessel that's older than the Titanic, it turns out the Trillium is in pretty good shape. The 107-year-old boat, the jewel of Toronto's ferry fleet, has plied the harbour for more than a century. But for the next few weeks it will be sitting metres above the water at the mouth of the Keating Channel, having been lifted into dry dock for an inspection and repairs to make sure it's still seaworthy. James Dann, the city's manager of waterfront parks, said that based on previous reports he was concerned that up to half the hull might need to be replaced due to corrosion. That likely would have blown the department's dry dock budget of about \$250,000 and left city council with a tough choice about whether to invest more money into the aging boat. But the diagnosis from Transport Canada inspectors came back positive this week, and only about 400 square feet, or 10 per cent of the hull, will need replacement. "I'm overjoyed," said Dann. "We love that boat."



**Steve Thompson is the engineer of the Trillium and is seen near the drive shaft controls.**

**RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR**

**It's also good news for the many fans the ferry has attracted over its long career. "It's not our most efficient boat, it's not the quickest boat, but it's the boat that people love to see in the water," said city parks spokesperson Matthew Cutler.**

**Built in 1910 by Polson Iron Works of Toronto, the Trillium has had an eventful life. In its early days it reportedly carried Babe Ruth to a baseball game at Hanlan's point, was pressed into service as a firefighting vessel when a dock went up in flames, and rescued two sailors whose craft was blown over by a gust of wind. It was left to rot in an Island lagoon after being decommissioned in 1957, but in 1974 it was rescued and restored for \$1,000,000.**



James Dann is the manager of waterfront services for the City and sits in the wheelhouse of the Trillium ferry.  
RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

**Believed to be the only side-wheel paddle steamer still in regular operation in North America, simply putting the Trillium in service can be a challenge. Although during the restoration it was fitted with new paddle wheels and its coal-fired boiler was replaced with a diesel-powered one, major components like the engine, whose pistons passengers can see protruding up through the floor of the lower deck, are original. According to Dann, it's difficult to find people knowledgeable enough to work as captain or engineer on such an outdated boat. For one thing the ferry, which is about half the size of a city block and can carry almost 1,000 passengers, is hard to steer. "The actual manipulation of this boat, especially in wind, is a real challenge," he said.**



An old control mechanism in the Trillium's wheelhouse.

RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Instead of the swiveling propellers that allow more modern boats to move in any direction, the Trillium mostly relies on a simple rudder for steering — although guiding thrusters were installed after the ferry collided with Captain John's floating restaurant in 1981. The city only operates the Trillium on weekends, and even then only if the weather is calm and long lines are expected at the terminal. Last year it was in service on 10 weekends.

Lifting the 400-ton, 150-foot-long boat out of the water for the inspection was no easy task. To do the job a company called Toronto Drydock sunk a 150-tonne barge by pumping its ballast chambers full of water. Once the Trillium was positioned overtop of it, the company raised the barge by forcing compressed air into the ballast chambers. The process took two days and a team of three divers. Toronto Drydock and a Port Colborne company will complete the repairs over the next four weeks. The work will likely cost more than \$100,000.



Federal inspectors combed through the Trillium while the 107-year-old ferry was in dry dock  
RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

While the Trillium looks likely to continue sailing for at least another few years, the youngest of Toronto's five main ferries, the Ongiara, was built nearly six decades ago, and eventually the entire fleet will need replacing. To that end, the city is planning to spend \$28.1 million on three new boats that will arrive between 2019 and 2026. Cutler said the city has marine architects working on the new vessels, and while they will be state-of-the-art, they will also likely take design cues from Toronto's historic vessels.

"The goal is to have a fleet that's modern and flexible but also reflects the heritage of the Toronto Ferry Service," he said.

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