

Crew asks judge to seize casino ship

Tampa Bay, Florida – Plans to run a 400-foot gambling ship in the gulf off Pinellas County have hit another setback.

Crew members of the Casino Royale filed suit Friday asking a federal judge to order the vessel seized and sold at auction so they can recover more than USD 230,000 in unpaid wages.

Crewmen interviewed last week said they hadn't received a paycheck since early July.

They also haven't been fed onboard in recent days and their water comes from a hose on the dock of the Tampa shipyard where the vessel is tied up, said attorney Michael Black, who filed the suit.

„The owners are people who have an expensive boat and are letting their debts get out of control,“ he said.

An executive with Ocean's 21 LLC of Treasure Island, operator of Casino Royale, blamed the problem on a conflict with a maritime company hired to provide the crew and care for the ship.

„The bottom line is we've got a commercial dispute that arises in the normal course of business,“ said Nigel White, president of Ocean's 21. He said everything would be settled before federal marshals seize the ship.

Ocean's 21 LLC brought the ship to Tampa in April for repairs while preparing to operate it as a floating casino with Las Vegas-style gambling just outside state waters.

The Casino Royale will have more than 500 slot machines, 45 gaming tables, a poker room and sports wagering lounge, states a company Web site. Shuttles would ferry customers to the ship

from Treasure Island.

In July, shipping agent Savage Shipping obtained a court order to seize the vessel for payment of USD 158,000 in overdue bills from maritime operator Tenmark Marine, which is working for Ocean's 21. The two sides reached a settlement before federal marshals took over the ship.

Ocean's 21 planned for Casino Royale to start sailing last month. But a paperwork glitch blamed on the ship's previous owners kept the Coast Guard from certifying the ship to carry passengers. The company placed nearly all of its 225 employees on unpaid leave .

The vessel's 32-member crew, employed by Tenmark, remained on board to clean, perform maintenance and keep watch while the vessel was tied up at Tampa Bay Shipbuilding & Repair Co.

Crew members didn't leave out of fear they would never see back wages, said crewman Josue Carcamo of Miami.

„The promise was that when the ship sails there will be regular salaries,“ he said in an interview last week. „The question is when they're going to sail. No one has an answer.“

Tenmark Marine owner Munir Khan said last week that his company didn't pay the crew because Ocean's 21 didn't pay him. He said Ocean's 21 would pay up last Friday and „things will be much happier on that boat.“ Khan did not return phone calls this week.

Many of the 25 crew members still on the ship Friday had bill collection letters and were running up late fees on credit cards, said Black, their attorney.

„They're just regular people living from paycheck to paycheck,“ he said.