

Big casino ship's arrival at Port delayed

Canaveral Port Authority commissioners on Wednesday could be asked to approve a temporary gambling operation out of Port Canaveral, until the 415-foot Ocean Jewel is refurbished at a shipyard in the Dominican Republic.

Port commissioners in September ratified a five-year, USD 18 million deal with Omega Commercial Finance to bring the 2,000-passenger Ocean Jewel to Brevard County early next year under the new name, Omega Royale.

The vessel, however, is at least four to five months from completion, maritime consultant Robert Lambert of Fort Lauderdale said.

„There isn't a date-certain," Lambert said. „It's somewhat contingent on them finalizing the financing to do the renovations down there. In the interim, they were thinking of chartering one of two vessels."

Lambert said Omega Commercial will discuss with the commission a plan to bring either a 200-foot or a 500-foot vessel to Port Canaveral to run gambling cruises in the interim.

„My preference is for the larger one, because it can get very unfriendly out there in the Gulf Stream," said Lambert, who would not identify either vessel.

Both ships are within a day's sail of Port Canaveral, but neither is in Florida, he said.

Lambert said an agreement with the port commission could be ironed out after Wednesday's meeting.

„It could be announced shortly thereafter," Lambert said. „The Port Authority's been extremely helpful in this process. I

wouldn't envision a problem there."

The deal with Omega Commercial apparently has not been solidified, and a smaller casino ship did not show up as scheduled in mid-November.

The port has had no comment on the talks.

„It's still in negotiations, and we don't talk about negotiations," port spokeswoman Rosalind Harvey said last week.

Built in Poland in 1982 for use as a Russian cruise ferry, the Ocean Jewel has been used for everything from cargo and cruising to a floating hospital in Dubai.

It had a one-year stint, from 2005 to 2006, as a gambling boat off the shore of Tampa.

Its then-parent, Titan Cruise Lines of Bradenton, incurred hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt, and declared bankruptcy.

The current owner bought it out of bankruptcy, and took it to the Caribbean for refurbishment and a name change to Omega Royale.

The Omega Royale would join several gambling vessels at Port Canaveral, which are struggling against the recession and competition from land-based casinos.

„My biggest concern, at least from a consulting point of view, is the opening of the Seminole Hard Rock (casino) over in Tampa. But, even so, that's fairly far out of the market area," Lambert said. „I think it would do just fine."