

Casino cruise line hits choppy water before setting sail

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HOLLYWOOD • Set to unfurl its sails just in time for the holiday crowd, Ambassador Casino Cruises has run into trouble now that the city is investigating the gambling ship as an unlicensed business and another South Florida cruise line is claiming the name as copyrighted.

City Manager Sam Finz said he was caught off-guard when he learned about the 162-foot-long ship docked at the Ambassador Hotel off Ocean Drive. Inside the 350-passenger ship, which has been docked in front of the hotel since October are video poker machines, slot machines and a roulette wheel.

"We've sent an inspector to see what's going on," Finz said, adding that the issue is "likely to come up at a commission meeting soon."

John Anthony, a consultant for the casino boat, said Jeffrey Steiner — the head of Ambassador Casino Cruises — is still negotiating with a bank to purchase the black-and-white boat. While it shares the hotel name, the gambling ship would operate independently, Anthony said, explaining "a death in the family has stalled things a little." The boat was set to begin cruises this month.

Steiner and Ambassador Hotel officials could not be reached for comment.

Meanwhile, the owner of another similarly named cruise line which charters vacation trips and not casino ships, said he was surprised when his company — Ambassador Cruise Lines — started getting calls from people who had read

a local article about the ship and wanted to book gambling trips. His company does not operate casino ships.

"We've been inundated with calls for the last 10 days from people trying to book passage on a gambling ship," said Philip Simon, from his Hallandale office. "The name is copyrighted. This is going to stop."

Anthony responded that the "name hasn't been finalized."

Complicating matters further, last month Hollywood code enforcement cited the gambling boat for renovating the ship in the hotel's docks, which is not allowed in that district. A special master is set to hear the matter today.

"They said the boat would be moved," said Jacqueline Gonzalez, who oversees code enforcement. "But it hasn't, and it now appears their intentions were very different."

Not only are gambling ships banned from operating in this district, but the city's occupational license office never received an application to operate the casino boat in that location, said Carlos Garcia of that department. The ship's operators never applied to register as an accessory use for the Ambassador Hotel either.

For years the city has been trying to move away from hosting such businesses. Hollywood has been in a legal wrangle with SunCruz casino, which officials say expanded beyond what they had originally approved.

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