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Regal Empress to be auctioned Friday in Tampa

BRADENTON -- About 100 crew members from the cruise liner Regal Empress have flown home to their native countries or have taken jobs on other cruise ships.

Another 200 crew members have opted to stay on board the 54-year-old vessel on the chance that they will be rehired if the ship sells at auction on Friday.

"Whoever buys the ship will need a lot of crew members," said Robert Toney, president of National Liquidators, a Fort Lauderdale company that was assigned to manage the Regal Empress after it was seized by U.S. marshals on April 18. "Those that remained on board said they wanted to take that chance."

National Liquidators has hired about 45 crew members to make sure that the vessel remains shipshape and that its staterooms are clean. Toney said that the other former crew members are being given free food and board.

Toney estimated total costs of maintaining the 612-foot ship over the past three weeks at about \$200,000. About \$50,000 of that was spent on airline tickets and ground transportation for crew members who chose to go home.

The Regal Empress is docked at the Port of Tampa, at a berth belonging to International Ship Repair & Marine Services. It was moved there from Port Manatee a week ago to save on dockage expenses.

U.S. marshals seized the ship on Easter weekend after a Fort Lauderdale engine repair company filed a lawsuit against Regal Cruises, the owner of the Regal Empress, stating the cruise line had failed to pay a \$725,000 bill.

Unable to sell the vessel or post a bond to cover its debt, Regal Cruises shut down for good April 28 and canceled all future cruises.

A federal court magistrate in Tampa then ruled that the ship should be sold at auction on May 16 to pay the cruise line's creditors, who have filed claims totaling more than \$3 million. A \$2 million minimum bid was set for the sale of the ship. If no one proves willing to pay that price, another auction will be held two weeks later.

William Mollard, a ship broker with J. Pierot Jr. & Sons, a New York firm in charge of selling the vessel, predicts a second sale won't be necessary.

"We've had a satisfactory degree of interest from prospective buyers," Mollard said. "I'd expect someone will buy her next Friday and put her back to work immediately."

Mollard said interested parties included cruise ship owners and prospective cruise ship owners, and there was "a distinct possibility" that the buyer could put the ship to work in the Tampa Bay area.

Appraisal firm Martin Ottaway Van Hemmen & Dolan of New York estimated that the Regal Empress, which can carry more than 900 passengers, could fetch as much as \$4 million at auction.

The auction will be at noon at the front entrance of the Hillsborough County Courthouse, 419 Pierce St. in Tampa.
