



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: September 26, 2002

In reply refer to: M-02-18

Admiral Thomas H. Collins
Commandant
U.S. Coast Guard
Washington, D.C. 20593-0001

About 1930 on January 4, 2001, the domestic high-speed vessel *Finest*, with 258 passengers, 5 crewmembers, and 1 company official on board, ran aground outside the Shrewsbury River channel to Sandy Hook Bay while en route from New York City, New York, to Highlands, New Jersey. The *Finest* refloated at 0007 on January 5, after the tide changed, and proceeded to Sandy Hook Bay Marina, where it docked at 0026 and discharged its passengers. No one on board the vessel suffered any injury, and the vessel sustained no damage. One person on board had to be evacuated from the vessel by helicopter for medical treatment of an allergic reaction unrelated to the accident.¹

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the grounding of the *Finest* was the failure of the vessel master to use appropriate navigational procedures and equipment to determine the vessel's position while approaching the Shrewsbury River channel. Contributing to the cause of the grounding was the lack of readily visible fixed navigational aids. Also contributing to the cause of the grounding was the failure of New York Fast Ferry (NYFF) to require the use of installed navigation equipment and to set guidelines for operations in adverse environmental conditions. Based on its investigation, the Safety Board identified safety issues in the following areas: adequacy of the navigational procedures; adequacy of navigational aids in the Shrewsbury River; and appropriateness of alcoholic beverage service after an accident.

The Coast Guard concluded in its 1992 Waterways Analysis and Management System study that while it was possible for vessels to navigate in the Shrewsbury River without navigational aids, to do so was "unsafe." Commercial operators in the river had requested larger fixed aids for the Shrewsbury River Channel, and, in 1993, the Coast Guard installed two beacons at the positions of buoys 2 and 3. During a winter storm, the beacons were damaged and the Coast Guard replaced them with buoys.

¹ For further information, read: National Transportation Safety Board, *Grounding of the Small Passenger Vessel Finest, Sandy Hook, New Jersey, on January 4, 2001*, Marine Accident Report NTSB/MAR-02/03 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 2002).

The lighted buoys in the Shrewsbury River channel are now replaced in the winter by smaller unlit buoys, which are less susceptible to ice damage. These smaller buoys, however, can be moved off station or forced under the ice, thereby leaving the channel inadequately marked. On the evening of the grounding, all of the channel buoys were obscured by ice. Without the aids, the master used visual observations of shore lights to make the final turn, something he did not normally do, and went aground.

Beacons are visible on radar and give the navigator precise reference points to use in navigating, regardless of conditions. Because radar is used for collision avoidance and, at the same time, can be used for navigation, the importance of maintaining a radar watch cannot be overstated. Beacons, quickly identifiable on radar, assist mariners by allowing them to navigate and to maintain a watch for other vessels at the same time.

Small passenger vessels were crucial to the evacuation of Manhattan on September 11, 2001. Because of their speed, in a time of disaster, high-speed vessels could evacuate large numbers of people from New York City. The potential use of high-speed vessels in such circumstances makes the provision of reliable navigational aids all the more critical.

The Safety Board considered whether the placement of ranges would help vessels transit the channel. Ranges are ineffective in conditions of reduced visibility. Beacons that are permanently installed at the entrance to a channel, however, will not be hidden by ice and can be identified by radar in fog. Based on its findings in this accident, the Safety Board concluded that the safety of navigation in the Shrewsbury River channel would be enhanced by the installation of navigational aids that are available for use in all conditions of visibility.

The National Transportation Safety Board, therefore, makes the following safety recommendation to the U.S. Coast Guard:

Install beacons to augment or replace buoys at the entrance to the Shrewsbury River channel. (M-02-18)

As a result of this investigation, the Safety Board also issued safety recommendations to New York Fast Ferry. The Safety Board would appreciate a response from you within 90 days addressing actions you have taken or intend to take to implement our recommendation. In your response to the recommendation in this letter, please refer to M-02-18. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 314-6177.

Acting Chairman CARMODY and Members HAMMERSCHMIDT, GOGLIA, and BLACK concurred in this recommendation.

Original Signed

By: Carol J. Carmody
Acting Chairman