

City Clerk

From: Jennifer Sulkowski <jss227@cornell.edu>
Sent: Monday, April 1, 2024 12:05 PM
To: City Clerk
Subject: Letter to City Council - Starline Issue

Dear City Council,

My name is Dr. Jennifer Pool, and I am a Mackinac Island resident. My husband, Yuri Pool, our three kids (ages 6 and 4 years old, and a newborn), and I went to get our Starline ferry passes last Thursday on the first day they went on sale. I was anxious to get our passes early as I've heard how hard it can be to get them. In the past, Starline has run out of passes, refused to sell passes past a certain date, and/or different staff members enforce completely different rules for resident passes. We've had no issues the last two years getting our passes, but I didn't want to take any chances.

I had our year round housing lease agreement, our bank statements for paid island utilities, and of course, our current ferry passes that expire in a month - all ready to show as proof of residence. Our daughter is enrolled at the school, I work there as a substitute teacher when needed, and our band, The McCartney Years, is under contract with Mission Point for a full time residency this upcoming season.

Our whole life is 100% here, on Mackinac Island.

So I was surprised when, despite all of that paperwork (which is also outlined on the website as being acceptable proof), we were told by the ticket office that none of it mattered if we didn't also have Michigan drivers licenses with our island addresses listed on them. As dual citizens of US and Canada, our Canadian drivers licenses are recognized in both countries. The drivers license policy seems discriminatory against immigrants, especially when we could prove our primary address is the island, as our US government social security cards have the island as our primary address. We tried to explain all this, but we just got yelled at instead and were told there were no exceptions. And never mind that we were all issued ferry passes the last two years with no problem.

All the employees at the ticket office know our names - they know we live and work here and we have undeniable proof to back that up. Yet, we were still denied. And that's highly stressful and alarming to two working parents of 3 kids, one of which is a newborn that has required several off island appointments since being born. We need to be able to get to doctors appointments, we need to be able to get to the pharmacy and grocery stores - how can Starline deny people the ability to freely access those things just because of an arbitrary drivers license rule, which is not stated anywhere online as a requirement and does not in any way dictate or determine one's ability to live and work on the island full time...because we already live and work here and have for the last two years!

It's arbitrary discrimination.

I also asked how the ferry would work for our five employees coming to live and work on the island for us this spring, summer, and fall. We will be performing 5+ shows a week at Mission Point, every Wednesday through Sunday, from May until September, with the potential to extend shows until the end of the season in October. As a growing business, we have also been recruited for tours into the late fall and winter, but the island would continue to be home base for our employees, especially since our residency is on going and will hopefully continue again at Mission Point next year. Furthermore, one day a week will be reserved for band meetings and rehearsals, so that really only leaves our employees with 1 free day off per week.

Starline told us that unless we can prove we have a business on the island, our employees would not be eligible for commuter passes. I tried to explain that the island does not issue business licenses for entertainment enterprises, but

that we could show our island business bank account as proof instead, and Starline said that wasn't acceptable. We were told we would have to buy \$1000 non-resident passes, which is quite an expensive startup cost (\$5000 in total, since we have 5 employees) for our business, which doesn't even really pay for itself against a regular tourist ticket unless the pass is used more than 1 time a week, and in our case, it likely wouldn't be because we only have 1 day off per week. We would be paying the same price for our employees to get on and off the island that tourists pay for the same service. Commuter passes are quite expensive, too. Even if we were issued commuter passes, it will still cost us \$200 just to get 5 employees on and off the island one single time...for basic needs, like groceries or the pharmacy.

I asked Starline how people like us can afford that. What if our employees need to make multiple trips a week to the pharmacy or to get groceries or food outside of what we provide for their room and board, or heaven forbid, what if they want to take a day off island to go visit their families or need regular access to specialty healthcare?

Why are we being forced to pay the same or close to the same prices to get them on and off the island for basic, essential needs as tourists pay for their non-essential vacations?

Starline then stated that our only "obligation" as employers is to get our employees to the island, and that once they are here, it's up to the employees to get themselves on and off as that's how many other businesses do it on the island.

I don't know if that's true about other businesses here or not, but I replied that if we, as employers, can't afford Starline's rates for ferry travel, certainly our employees can't, either. And how is that mentality not dangerously approaching the line of human trafficking? Are some businesses having to knowingly trap their employees on the island because ferry passes and prices are too expensive?

Why would the island condone or support or allow a ferry company to uphold prices and policies that make it financially impossible for employees to make it back and forth from the island? It's like they are being punished and penalized for not being residents, but there is no extra housing available on the island for most employees to be residents, and if it wasn't for ALL island employees, the island wouldn't exist. Especially the employees working in the tourist industry, which is the only thing keeping the ferry company in existence. If anything, employee passes should be less than resident passes because not all residents work on the island. By having employee passes at the same or lower rate as resident passes, you wouldn't have Starline gatekeeping resident passes. I've heard of employees illegally changing or applying for paperwork, like voter registrations, to try to qualify for resident passes. And it's not because they want to break the law, it's because they are trying to make a living, which is tough anywhere, but especially on the island, and paying hundreds or thousands of extra dollars for a non-resident pass just to work on the island takes food off their families' tables. Like...where is the humanity? This is an essential ferry service, not a luxury or lazy or exclusive non-essential limousine service. There is no economical way on or off the island besides the ferry.

We, as an island business, are committed to providing a safe, happy environment for our employees so of course we will absorb the ferry costs for them, so that they are able to travel freely. However, \$5000 is an enormous up front expense for a small business like us to absorb, especially when it really has nothing to do with our actual business - and it's an expense that matches what tourists pay. Starline makes no concessions for people in our situation and literally stated that they don't care if their prices mean that hard, honest workers are trapped on the island as a default of their service to the island. Meanwhile, our show, powered by our employees, are hopefully attracting thousands of visitors to the island who will be using their ferry service.

I find this appalling. And I bet none of you find this surprising, because even though we are new here, we've quickly become acclimated to the history and corruption Starline has been getting away with here for years.

Why is their corruption allowed to continue?

We, as newcomers, have been told from the beginning that it can be very hard if not impossible to "make it" on Mackinac Island, but it doesn't seem like it needs to be that way. If essential-to-life-on-Mackinac details like this are dealt with, they wouldn't all add up to make things so impossible for people like us wanting to work hard and make an

honest living here. We want to take good care of our talented employees who we feel are adding to island tourism. Our show is a world class show - it's toured the world, we are family friendly entertainment, and we are purposely keeping ticket prices low (\$25) so that it's affordable and accessible to entire families and large groups. But shouldn't it also be affordable for us to operate this way? From a strictly public health and ethical standpoint, if the city allows essential services like the ferry to be unaccessible for employees, employers will be forced to cut corners in other ways, in order to offset the expense, and that's not good or safe business for anyone.

Furthermore, everyone - tourists, residents, locals, and islanders alike - are all concerned about big corporations pushing out the "little guys" and taking away the small town charm and mentality of the island. Only big corporations can afford mass visa employee programs that come with commuter ferry passes and other privileges.

People like us and businesses like ours don't qualify for those programs. We are and always will be the little guys on the island. We are employing 4 Americans and 1 Canadian. We are a new family here who has given up everything to move to the island so we can live and raise our family here. We absolutely love it here, and we are fully immersed in the community, because we know and love that community must go both ways. But we also need to be able to make a living and we need to be able to provide a safe, inviting, quality environment for our employees, which does not include trapping them here because the ferry service, which is considered an essential service, is unobtainable, financially for both them and us.

If we all know it's next to impossible for new families and small entrepreneurs to make it here, then why not do something about it? If you break the problem down, it's details like this ferry issue that add up to make things so hard.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Accessible and affordable ferry travel is essential to residents and workers/employees, and besides horses, the island's residents and employees are who keep the island living and breathing year round. If residents and workers cease to exist, there would be no island for tourists visit and then Starline wouldn't exist.

In response to this qualm, I've heard people say, "well it's a privilege to live and work on Mackinac Island, if you're committed enough, you'll make it work."

And that's true, it is absolutely a privilege to be here. And we are fully committed. So much so, we were literally homeless for 8 weeks when we first moved here because our original housing situation fell through. We have given up everything to live and make a living here with our family.

But that doesn't mean the island should ask or require people to give up their basic human rights to access basic human services. If you live and/or work on the island, being able to take the ferry is both a need and a right because it's the gateway to everything essential that the island can't offer - like a pharmacy, groceries, specialty health care, etc. The ferry is also the gateway to a living working wage. Hundreds of people get on and off the ferry every day simply to work here for the island's benefit. The ferry should not be able to take such a huge cut of the average island worker's living wage just because they return home to the mainland every night.

You cannot appreciate a privilege if your basic needs aren't met, and there is absolutely no reason why we can't make the ferry a more accessible and supportive entity to fulfill those basic needs for our people - good people - who live and work here and who are what make Mackinac Island such a privileged place to be a part of.

Therefore, I urge you to hold Starline accountable as the essential public service that it is. It's time for its corruption to end. Everyone who lives on Mackinac Island has an exciting and busy season ahead with plenty of challenges that are inherent to the tourism industry and island life - however, affordable and accessible ferry service should not be one of them.

Thank you,

