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Sunken barge rises slowly

Salvagers work through night to bring vessel to surface

By Chuck Frederick and Sarah Jackson

News Tribune staff writers

Workers had hoped to bring a sunken barge out of the Duluth Harbor on Tuesday, but efforts to fill it with air and float it were slow going.

“We're going to work through the night,” said diver Chad Scott of Krech, Ojard & Associates Consulting Engineers in Duluth, on Tuesday evening.

Salvagers started pumping air into the barge's ballast tanks about 3:30 p.m. Tuesday and were still working into this morning.

“It's just a slow process,” Scott said.

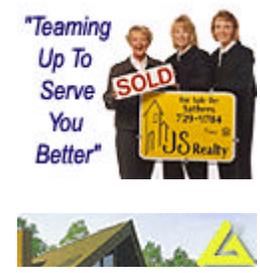
Eventually, the air should make the vessel buoyant enough to rise from the bottom of the harbor's 30-foot-deep shipping lanes.

Once near the surface, crews will pull the barge to shallow water near Minnesota Point. Then a specially equipped tug will pump out the remaining water.

After that, the barge is expected to be towed to Fraser Shipyards in Superior for repairs.

The barge has been at the bottom of the harbor since Nov. 3. A day earlier it was dredging shipping lanes when it unexpectedly took on water.

The flatbed boat listed severely, dumped its load of dredge spoils and then slipped under the surface until only one corner stuck out of the water. The vessel sank to the bottom early the next morning.





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What caused the mishap is still unclear.

It's been decades since a large vessel went down in the harbor.

Two weeks ago, divers connected steel cables to the 60-ton excavator backhoe from the bed of the barge so it could be lifted to the surface and towed to shore for repairs.

Since then, those divers have been working to connect air fittings onto the barge's hatch covers. The divers are from Krech, Ojard and from Superior Special Services of Fond du Lac, Wis., which specializes in recovering sunken vessels.

Owned by Billington Contracting Inc., of Duluth, the barge was being used to dredge shipping lanes under a contract with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

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