

Rusting Clamagore sub at Patriots Point likely to become a marine reef

- **Abigail Darlington**
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Brad Nettles/StaffPatriots Point will soon part ways with the Clamagore submarine, which has been a part of the tourist attraction for 32 years. Reefmakers, a Florida-based organization, will transform it into an artificial reef and sink it at an undetermined location.

The USS Clamagore is nearing the end of its rope at Patriots Point.

Service record

The USS Clamagore was commissioned a few months too late for combat duty in World War II, so it was updated and used as a surveillance vessel during the Cold War. It was decommissioned in 1975 and has been on display at Patriots Point Naval & Maritime Museum since 1981.

The Patriots Point Development Authority plans to hand over the rusting submarine to Reefmakers, a Florida-based organization that specializes in sinking vessels to create artificial reefs.

The Clamagore could be out of Charleston Harbor as soon as next month, said Mac Burdette, executive director of Patriots Point.

Once Reefmakers finds a destination, the sub will be taken from the state-owned tourist attraction and remediated to ensure it won't harm the environment.

The Clamagore Veterans Association has tried for two years to keep the sub its members served on from heading to the ocean floor, but they couldn't raise the estimated \$4 million.

The 400-member group also was unable to find a municipality or organization to adopt the vessel and fund its upkeep, which would cost at least \$250,000 annually, said Bob Dewar, president.

The Patriots Point Development Authority extended the deadline several times to give the association more time to raise money. The agency also helped locate donors, Dewar said.

"Patriots Point, as far as the administration, has gone way above and beyond the call of duty. Previous boards ignored her, and that's how she got in such bad shape," Dewar said. "It just

comes a time when you have to ask what's going to be the best thing not just for Patriots Point but for the boat. Submerged, (the sub) is going to last a lot longer."

A separate group of sub veterans, The Clamagore Restoration and Maintenance Association, also took up the cause. It said it's not willing to let the sub go down without a fight.

"We're submarine sailors, we don't give up. That's our history," said spokesman Rick Wise. "When we give up, then we're usually on the bottom for good."

The group's immediate goal is to find a place to keep the sub while they seek to raise restoration money. Wise said he is not convinced that the project would be as expensive as Patriots Point has estimated.

"I agree that it's going to cost a bit to do it, but whether it's going to be that much or not, that's just a number," he said.

Patriots Point commissioned an independent marine engineer to conduct the assessment.

The state agency can't afford another expensive vessel repair. It still has to repay a majority of the \$9.2 million it borrowed from the state to patch the Laffey warship. The aircraft carrier Yorktown is also deteriorating, and that fix could cost up to \$100 million.

"If we had \$4 million available, we would choose under our priorities to put it into The Yorktown. It's not a matter of heart, it's a matter of business," Burdette said.

Fundraising experts told Dewar that it would take his group up to five years to raise the money it needed. Meanwhile, Burdette noted that the marine engineer's report determined the vessel couldn't withstand a hurricane.

"We've given them almost two years to raise the money to restore the Clamagore," Burdette said. "It's not been possible and we are not going to take the chance of the Clamagore going through another hurricane season as fragile as she is. It could end up in catastrophic results."

Burdette said the state agency will work with the Clamagore Veterans Association to create a landside memorial at Patriots Point to honor the sub and its crew.

Wise said his group fears the fate of the submarine if it's turned over to Reefmakers.

"If it becomes too expensive for them to make it environmentally neutral, then they will sell it as scrap. That's probably what will happen to it," he said.

Joe Weatherby with Reefmakers disagreed.

"We save (vessels) from the scrappers," he said. "Our proposition is to find them a good home," he said. "We're all about the dignity of the ships and the veterans who served on them."

Weatherby said turning the Clamagore into a reef will cost millions of dollars, but that he's already seen interest from communities who would be willing to cover the cost.