

Clamagore submarine move from Patriots Point to Florida hinges on vote

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The relocation of the Clamagore submarine from Patriots Point to an underwater reef off the Florida coast appears to be imminent. File/Staff

Time has almost run out for Patriots Point's Cold War submarine attraction.

For years, the Clamagore has faced the prospect of being submerged permanently along Florida's Atlantic coast because of mounting maintenance expenses. A vote this week could finally clear the way for the vessel's final voyage.

The Palm Beach County Commissioners are [set to vote](#) Tuesday to approve \$1 million to haul the Clamagore from Mount Pleasant and deposit it in 75 feet of water about a mile off Juno Beach, north of Miami.

Keeping the vessel at Patriots Point Naval & Maritime Museum in Mount Pleasant costs \$250,000 a year in maintenance, and the sub needs \$6 million in repairs to keep it afloat, said Mac Burdette, executive director. It's an expense that the state-owned tourist attraction can't afford anymore, he said.

"Our board looked at every available option," Burdette said. "The most desired option was to find a museum home for the Clamagore, where she would be displayed for the public. Over the last five years, we have looked at various options. However, there have been no legitimate offers."

He added that it's important to understand that even though the state of South Carolina owns the vessel, the U.S. Navy must approve all transfers of ships like the Clamagore.

"That left us with two options, one being the least attractive, that is scrapping the vessel, which was not an option that our board wished to discuss," he said. "The other was to reef the vessel in the coastal waters of the United States where she could still serve our nation's interest from an environmental standpoint."

The Clamagore would still be an attraction at its new watery home off the Sunshine State, according to Dan Bates with Palm Beach County Environmental Resources Management. Divers could look inside, and a landside museum would display some of the instruments, photographs and history.

The Clamagore served on active duty from 1945 to 1975. The sub was first assigned in Key West and later based in Charleston. It was moved to Patriots Point in 1981 and designated a National Historic Landmark in 1989, as the only Guppy III submarine preserved in the United States. Bates said he expects the commissioners in Palm Beach to approve the seven-figure expenditure, which would come from registration fees paid by boat owners in the area. The sub would likely be moved within the next couple months, he said.

Patriots Point announced plans to move the Clamagore to Florida more than five years ago but delayed to give veterans groups a chance to raise the money for an alternative. For the last couple

years, the USS Clamagore Preservation and Memorial Association has been trying to include the sub in a naval museum in Knoxville, Tenn.

"We were not aware of this vote, but these have failed in the past and we are hoping that this one fails as well," said Marvin Helms, the group's vice chairman. "Our primary issue is to find land that could berth her here in Tennessee. We have not made a large effort to raise money until land is located, as that starts the process to release the Clamagore from its contract between Patriots Point and the U.S. Navy."

Once the Navy cuts ties with Patriots Point, it could take up to two years for the veterans group to gain possession, he said.

Under the Palm Beach plan, Artificial Reefs International would haul the 320-foot sub from South Carolina to Florida on a barge. It would cost another \$3 million or so to strip the sub's wiring, sand blast the paint and remove any other pollutants, Bates said. He expects the additional money to come from sponsorships, donations and grants.

Bates said he hopes to get the sub under water and the museum open by August. More than 45 other ships have already been sunk in the area, as well as concrete from old bridges. The structures attract fish and other marine life, as well as divers that boost the local economy.

Burdette said releasing the sub was not an easy decision.

"Sometimes in business, when your assets become liabilities, within the broader framework of your goals and objectives, you must make difficult decisions," he said. "Our board has done everything possible to deal with this issue respectfully and responsibly for not only the men who served on the USS Clamagore and the Clamagore itself, but also the long-term sustainment of the one greatest naval and maritime museums in the nation."

Patriots Point will continue to focus on the aircraft carrier Yorktown and the destroyer Laffey. "We've recently invested more than \$13 million in the restoration of the ... Laffey and have plans to **invest** more than \$50 million in the ... Yorktown over the next 50 years," Burdette said. "The Patriots Point team has also recently approved a multimillion-dollar plan to modernize the museum, ensuring sustainability for many decades to come."

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