



For Immediate Release

DESTIN-FORT WALTON BEACH AND THE SS UNITED STATES CONSERVANCY TAKE FIRST STEP TOWARD CREATING THE WORLD'S LARGEST ARTIFICIAL REEF

Historic SS United States Closer to Living on as a Marine Habitat, Global Tourism Destination and Innovative Museum

October 1, 2024 - (OKALOOSA COUNTY, Fla.) – Destin-Fort Walton Beach, Florida, and the SS United States Conservancy announced today that the Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners has approved a contingent contract to acquire the SS *United States* that could see the historic ocean liner converted into the world's largest artificial reef. Part of the deal would also include funding from the county to support the Conservancy's establishment of an innovative land-based museum that will provide divers, local residents and visitors an opportunity to learn about the legacy of America's Flagship.

The SS *United States* was launched in 1951 and still holds the transatlantic speed record, achieved on her maiden voyage using only two-thirds of her power. She transported presidents, stars of stage and screen, heads of state, tourists, members of the armed forces, and immigrants until the advent of the jet age forced her retirement in 1969. Notable passengers included four U.S. Presidents (Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and a young Bill Clinton), plus Marlon Brando, Coco Chanel, Sean Connery, Duke Ellington, Salvador Dali, Walt Disney, Judy Garland, Cary Grant, Bob Hope, Marilyn Monroe, and John Wayne. (To learn more about the ship's historical importance, visit <https://www.ssusc.org/history-the-glory-years>.)

Designed as a top-secret, convertible troop carrier and Cold War weapon, she could transport 14,000 troops 10,000 miles without refueling. The vessel is widely considered the pinnacle of American post-war maritime engineering and a soaring symbol of her namesake nation. The SS United States Conservancy has kept the famous ocean liner safely afloat since acquiring her in 2011.

Once deployed off Destin-Fort Walton Beach, at nearly 1,000-feet long, the SS *United States* will be a home for a diverse range of marine life and attract divers and anglers from around the world. The purchase of the SS *United States* will continue the growth of Destin-Fort Walton Beach's robust artificial reef program, the most active, and one of the largest vessel artificial reef collections in the United States.

The deal to acquire the vessel from the Conservancy could close in the coming weeks, contingent upon the conclusion of the current U.S. District Court-imposed mediation. The vessel would then be moved from Philadelphia after initial preparations and a towing plan are completed. A conservative

allocation of up to \$10.1 million is estimated for the acquisition, remediation, transport, and deployment of the historic ocean liner, as well as partial funding to help establish the Conservancy's land-based museum and immersive experience.

"I am extremely proud of our team and the effort required to achieve this tremendous next step in bringing such a breathtaking vessel to the waters of Destin-Fort Walton Beach," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Paul Mixon. "Our artificial reef system has shown impressive growth through the years and this accomplishment confirms our commitment to remain good stewards of the environment, while also enhancing our community's status as a premier diving and fishing destination."

"Having the title of the World's Largest Artificial Reef continues to elevate Destin-Fort Walton Beach as a premier destination to visit for scuba diving and fishing. The SS *United States* will be an exciting addition to the many artificial reefs and wrecks available in Destin-Fort Walton Beach for divers to explore while providing essential habitat for the fishery that our fleet is so dependent on," said Jennifer Adams, Tourism Director.

According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, for every dollar spent on artificial reefs in the Florida Panhandle, the conservative overall economic benefit of the artificial reef system over its life span is \$138, a 13,800% return on investment. This includes job creation in the construction and maintenance of reefs and increased economic activity in related sectors such as retail.

"The SS *United States* has inspired millions the world over as a symbol of American pride and excellence. Should the ship be converted into an artificial reef, she will become a unique historic attraction above and below the waterline. A land-based museum and immersive experience utilizing the latest technology will showcase her unique story and proud history. Converting the world's fastest ship into the world's largest artificial reef will write a new chapter for the SS *United States* as a world class destination," stated Conservancy President Susan Gibbs.

"While the Conservancy has worked tirelessly for over a decade to secure a new home for the SS *United States* and repurpose the historic ocean liner as a floating, mixed-use development, a challenging Court- order evicting the ship from her current pier has compelled us to explore this alternative to scrapping. We are confident that the experienced and committed team in Okaloosa County fully appreciates the historic significance of the SS *United States* and our longstanding commitment to educating and exciting future generations about this unique expression of American maritime history and technological innovation."

The SS *United States* Conservancy's future museum is expected to feature a one-of-a-kind experience for visitors who will be able to explore the ship's extraordinary history. It will encompass iconic components from the ship, including the vessel's radar mast and at least one of her signature funnels, and highlights from the Conservancy's extensive curatorial collections.

This agreement, once closed, would mark the start of a lengthy process that will include the cleaning and preparation of the ship. It is expected to take more than a year to complete the necessary environmental remediation of the historic ocean liner and an additional six months to a year to

arrange the vessel's deployment. The exact deployment location offshore Destin-Fort Walton Beach has not been determined, but it is projected to be deployed at a depth that will be widely accessible, providing ample opportunities for novice, intermediate, and advanced technical divers.

For more information on Destin-Fort Walton Beach's extensive artificial reef program, including coordinates and 3-D mapping, please visit <https://www.destinfb.com/explore/eco-tourism/artificial-reefs/>. To learn more about the history of America's Flagship and the Conservancy's work to tell her story, as well as view highlights of its extensive curatorial and archival museum collection, visit <https://www.ssusc.org/>.

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About Destin-Fort Walton Beach, Florida

www.destinfb.com

Captivating sugar-white sand beaches and emerald-green waters await in Destin-Fort Walton Beach. Located in Northwest Florida, the destination is not only an ideal place to unwind and experience total relaxation along a 20-mile stretch of beach, but to uncover the adventurous side within. The family-friendly locale offers an environment of discovery to play and explore, inviting kids to get on the water and give their adventurous side room to grow. Visitors enjoy pristine beaches, Gulf-to-Table seafood, abundant watersport and other outdoor activities, championship golf, lively nightlife, and numerous attractions, festivals and events designed to thrill all ages.

About the SS United States Conservancy:

A national nonprofit organization, the SS United States Conservancy leads the global effort to celebrate and commemorate America's Flagship, the SS *United States*. The Conservancy raises public awareness and financial resources for the maintenance and preservation of the iconic vessel and her legacy. Through its extensive curatorial collections and educational programs, the Conservancy works to ensure that the fastest ocean liner ever to cross the Atlantic Ocean remains an inspiration for generations to come. For more information about the SS United States Conservancy and America's Flagship, visit ssusc.org or the Conservancy's [Facebook page](#).

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