

Rhode Island Senate Proposes Reefing Legislation

By Jesse Rathier

Nicknamed Little Rhody, the nation's smallest state, Rhode Island, took a giant step forward this month when the senate proposed legislation to authorize the creation of man made reefs in the waters off the states southern coast.

Democrat State Senators John J. Tassoni, Jr. with V. Susan Sosnowski and Christopher B. Maselli came together to co-sponsor Senate Bill S2441. This legislation would authorize the State of Rhode Island to accept custody of decommissioned warships from the US Navy and US Maritime Administration for the purpose of sinking a vessel to form an artificial reef.

Known as "reefing", project organizers envision obtaining surplus vessels from as far away as Virginia and towing them into Narragansett Bay. There they will be docked and prepared for sinking at a site somewhere within the waters of Rhode Island or Block Island Sound.



USNS Hoyt S. Vandenberg

Robert Brousseau, founder of New England Ships2Reefs (NES2R), Inc has teamed with Joe Weatherby, from ReefMakers, Inc who operates in New Jersey and Florida. Together they have

started promoting this first-ever project in RI.

ReefMakers played a key role in the preparation and deployment of the Hoyt S. Vandenberg off the coast of Key West, Florida in 2009. In an interview, Brousseau said, "I want to sink a ship here in RI. Joe (Weatherby) has actually made it happen elsewhere. That's why I chose him to help me navigate the political, financial and environmental hurdles we expect to encounter."

Brousseau and NES2R are beginning the process of seeking out and engaging all stakeholders who have an interest in the effort. Everyone from fishermen to educators to regulators will be asked to offer input into the project in order to extract the maximum possible benefit for the environment and the citizens of Rhode Island.

When asked about similar projects undertaken in states out side of New England, Weatherby is quick to point out that a number of states including Florida, New Jersey and California all have aggressive reefing efforts that have shown big pay offs in terms of job creation and documented benefits to the marine eco system.

Asked if RI could expect similar benefit pay-offs in the often cold waters of New England, Brousseau said that the Yukon, a decommissioned Canadian warship sent to the bottom in San Diego, CA is also in a cold water environment. That project continues to pay off in terms of increased biomass and dollars. He also noted that all communities with ship-to-reef programs have reported the creation of jobs and sales tax dollars as eco-tourists, recreational fishermen and SCUBA divers come from around the

world to visit these sites. Weatherby also recalled reported success in places as far afield as Plymouth England, another cold water site of a ship-to-reef project. There, project organizers report approximately \$38 million (USD) in gross commerce with over 42,000 divers having visited the ex-HMS Scylla. That represents over 7,000 dive boat trips since 2004.

The process of identifying and transferring custody of a vessel coupled with preparing it to conform to EPA Best Management Standards and then sinking it in RI waters is expected to take approximately 3 years. The bulk of the funds contracted out will cover the cost of transport and will go toward pier services and laborers used for cleaning up hazardous materials including oils, fuels and PCB's found in items like electronic equipment. Engineers will also be hired to study ship drawings and open holes in the ship. These openings are essential for the even-keeled sinking of the vessel to ensure an upright settling on the ocean floor.

Said Weatherby, "the real significance in terms of job creation and tourism will come after the ship is sent to the bottom". After 'Sink-Day', there are no further costs to the project or the State. In fact, the State can expect to receive revenue from the site for the next 100 years!"

Asked why he is so passionate about the project, Brousseau explained; "I see two problems facing our fellow Rhode Islanders today that this effort will help improve. The first is our high unemployment rate and sluggish economy. The second problem is an environmental one. This project will focus world-wide media attention on RI,

create jobs right here at home and the ship will provide a breeding ground for new marine life, both plant and animal, for years to come."

"My entire adult life has revolved around all things in and of the sea. I am fascinated by anything that involves the majesty of our oceans." A 28 year retired Navy veteran, Brousseau is currently employed by the US Navy as a research engineer. He also founded Simply Scuba, LLC, another RI based business, where he teaches SCUBA diving to the public. He is also the New England Course Director for the Handicapped Scuba Association (HSA). "I love to teach", says Brousseau. "Nothing is more gratifying than having the ability to show people the beauty hidden beneath the waves and experience the adventure offered by the underwater realm. Teaching folks with disabilities is especially wonderful when I can help someone bound to a wheelchair on land, fly in the gravity free environment of the open sea. Beyond that, as a life long resident of RI, I recognize that the people of this state need help (job creation). This project is a win-win for everyone involved – it's good for the economy and the ecology of RI."

In closing, both Brousseau and Weatherby said they were marveled by the leadership and foresight shown by the bills sponsors and by everyone they encountered during recent visits to the Statehouse. "Without exception, everyone we have spoken to over recent weeks have been gracious and supportive." Brousseau added, "From Secretary of State Mollis, DEM Director Dr. Sullivan and all of the Senators who gave of their time for us to speak with them, everyone has shown great interest. However, in order for us to get this

legislation passed, we need state and community support. We will create jobs and we will improve diving and fishing opportunities while filling local hotels and restaurants. The beauty is that the environment wins too. But to make this happen, Rhode Islanders will need to contact their representatives to voice their support. We have been very honored by the reception we have received at the Statehouse. Every Rhode Islander will be pleasantly surprised how accessible and eager our representatives are to hear from us. We urge all RI citizens to visit www.rilin.state.ri.us/Senate/ to locate and email letters of support to their Senator.”

Author, Jesse Rathier is currently enrolled as a Business Management student at the Providence campus of Johnson and Wales University.

Letters of support may also be sent to New England Ships2Reef, PO Box 5138, Newport, RI 02841