

Laffey stranded?



FILE/BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

Patriots Point Board Chairman John Hagerty said that letting the Laffey go after spending \$9.2 million on it seems like a tough decision, but might be the only choice.

Tough decisions may lie ahead for Patriots Point

BY ALLYSON BIRD
The Post and Courier

After spending more than \$9 million in state money to repair the Laffey, Patriots Point can't afford to bring the famed World War II destroyer home, and its board spoke candidly Tuesday about trying to sell or give away the warship.

The group also discussed repaying the loan, due Dec. 1, and approved a plan to make \$25,000 annual installments, plus interest.



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At that rate, the Mount Pleasant attraction would take 369 years to pay off its debt.

When the museum accepted its state loan for emergency repairs to the Laffey last summer, it did so while banking on \$20 million

in federal funding that never came through. Approaching the payback deadline, the board approved a plan to submit to state officials asking for a loan extension with a small fraction due each year.

Patriots Point must take its proposal to the state's Joint Bond Review Committee and the Budget and Control Board, according to Deputy State Treasurer Scott Malyerck. Otherwise, he said his

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office expects full payment on or prior to Dec. 1.

For now, the board voted to

dock the Laffey at the Macalloy property, a 135-acre industrial site in the Neck Area, as early as next week. Patriots Point will pay about \$125,000 for a mooring structure and \$11,250 per month to Shipyard Creek Associates to house the ship, which now sits at a State Ports Authority pier.

As Patriots Point Operations Director Bob Howard explained to the board: "At this point this happens to be the best and, quite frankly, the only option for us."

Returning the Laffey to the attraction, anywhere other than its previous spot, would cost more than \$2 million, according to Howard, including \$1 million for moorings, nearly \$800,000 to close the marina to bring in the ship and \$400,000 for dredging

— but that's today, and more silt will gather in the meantime. Returning the ship to its original spot would cost about \$650,000, but that location poses risks in severe weather.

The Laffey sprang about 100 leaks in late 2008 and, as hurricane season approached last year, Patriots Point officials pleaded with political leaders for money to move the ship for emergency repairs. After Detyens Shipyards completed the work, the museum transferred the Laffey to a State Ports Authority pier in North Charleston under the agreement that it would find another home by the end of May — and the start of this hurricane season.

The license with Shipyard Creek Associates runs for 11 months. Patriots Point Execu-

tive Director Dick Trammell said he hopes to reassess the situation in October, after the federal budget process, to see if the South Carolina delegation secured any funding.

"So what if the money doesn't come from Washington?" board member Susan Marlowe wondered aloud.

Chairman John Hagerty said that letting the Laffey go after spending \$9.2 million on her seems like a tough decision but might be the only choice — just as Patriots Point had to repair the ship or else risk polluting Charleston Harbor and affronting the U.S. military. He also discussed shedding the submarine Clamagore.

"You have to ask yourself: As Patriots Point is presently constructed, can it afford to keep these ships?" Hagerty said. "You can make these short-term decisions, but it ignores the fact that

steel on saltwater has a 30-year life. We have major expenses in front of us. This goes far beyond several millions one way or another for Laffey."

The Clamagore needs \$3 million in repairs, and the aircraft carrier Yorktown requires upwards of \$100 million, unless Patriots Point moves it to a coffer dam. Placing the Laffey and the Clamagore on the starboard side of the Yorktown, the best spot for the ships, would cost \$5 million.

Hagerty brought up the possibility of selling some of the attraction's 400 acres of land. Patriots Point plans to pay for the Laffey's move to the Macalloy site by dipping into its approximately \$3 million in reserve funds.

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