

Commission cautious on reef project

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KEY WEST — The 523-foot USS Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg could very well end up on the ocean floor, as planned, but the Key West City Commission has taken steps to ensure the project will not sink the city if it flounders. Commissioner Bill Verge on Tuesday asked his fellow commissioners and the mayor to support a resolution that would enable City Attorney Shawn Smith to begin negotiations, "if necessary," that would release the title of the ship from the city's hands to the banks that have funded the artificial reef project. "The purpose is not to terminate the Vandenberg project," said Verge, who has worked with project organizers to sink what would be the second-largest ship ever intentionally sunk as an artificial reef. "The purpose is to put the city in the right position." Currently, the city holds the title to the former military ship that project organizers hope will come to rest, as its final tour of duty, on the ocean floor about seven miles from Key West. Proponents say the new reef would attract divers, fishermen, snorkelers and researchers.

"Things are still moving along, and we're making some progress," Verge said. He reminded those attending Tuesday's commission meeting that the Monroe County Tourist Development Council has predicted a bleak financial summer for Keys tourism, and said the sinking of the Vandenberg in May would rectify much of that.

Verge also has letters from the producers of Discovery Channel's "Mythbusters" and CBS "Sunday Morning News," both of whom have said they want to produce television shows about the sinking of the ship.

"If that's not good publicity for Key West in the summertime, I don't know what is," Verge said. Toward the end of the meeting, Commissioner Barry Gibson, the owner of a business on Duval Street, thanked Verge for his commitment to ensuring a good summer.

There was far less discussion Tuesday about the resignation of Police Chief Bill Mauldin, which was announced to the public and the media just before the commission meeting. Mauldin's resignation comes amid allegations of sexual harassment of a female co-worker. Mauldin denies those allegations. Commissioner Teri Johnston said the officers of the Key West Police Department deserve the support of the commission and the city. "It's time to heal now," she said. "A clear-cut message has been sent that this type of behavior will not be tolerated."

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