

National media focus on Vandenberg

Project organizers and city officials are scrambling to raise enough money to keep the artificial reef project alive.



File photo courtesy of Andy Newman

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Despite last-minute cost increases and unexpected funding shortfalls, efforts to sink the USS Hoyt S. Vandenberg continue at a frenetic pace, with city officials and project organizers hastening to secure another \$2.3 million from a variety of sources. In the meantime, national and international filmmakers and television producers are moving forward with various plans to document the preparation, relocation and intentional scuttling of the 523-foot-long ship as an artificial reef. Dan Tapster, executive producer of “Mythbusters,” which airs on the Discovery Channel, contacted the project organizers and is planning a one-hour “Mythbusters” episode to be shot on location in Key West. The show, which airs in 110 countries, features two Hollywood special effects experts who regularly test “urban myths” using science and technology. “The ‘MYTH-TANIC’ episode that will feature the scuttling of the Vandenberg proves to be one of the biggest shows of Series 6,” Tapster wrote. “All in all this is going to be pushed and played as a landmark MythBusters show.” The episode is set to test the theory, espoused in Hollywood blockbusters such as “Titanic,” that items and people on the deck of a sinking ship are sucked down into a vortex of swirling water as the ship slides beneath the surface. Key West City Commissioner Bill Verge, who has been working to secure funding for the artificial reef project, said the crew plans to place mannequins and other objects on the decks of the massive ship for the filming.

“Apparently they already tried this, but they didn’t have a big enough ship,” said Joe Weatherby, who has been working to sink the Vandenberg for 11 years. He acknowledged that being about \$2 million over the projected budget is “not a comfortable place to be.” “It’s painful for me to say this, but we’ve really got a high-profile project here and there are people kicking down doors to do these kinds of films and documentaries,” Weatherby said. “The [return on investment] is like nothing else.” He estimated that shows such as MythBusters” and several others could translate to more than \$10 million worth of free media. A Discovery Channel documentary also is being created by John Bruno, who won an Oscar for his special effects in “The Abyss.” Bruno was nominated for six other Oscars for “True Lies,” “Ghostbusters,” and “Batman Returns.” Weatherby also has a commitment from the producer of CBS News Sunday Morning, which reaches 5 million people. The eight-minute segment would include “an overview of your project and the expected benefits on the stressed coral reef system, as well as the economic benefits for the communities along the Florida coast,” wrote Jason Sacca, producer of the show. “As far as a shooting schedule, it makes sense to start with a tour of the Vandenberg in Norfolk [where it is currently being cleaned of contaminants] and shoot some video of the ship being readied for sinking.”

Internationally, a German producer wants to create a film that explores the “ships to reefs” concept in North Carolina, England and Key West. “Off Key West, things get exciting,” wrote producer Ulf Marquardt in his proposal to Weatherby. “The mighty USS Vandenberg will sink in a minute.

We hope to film this event with three cameras, from a boat, from a helicopter, and our technicians figure out if it is feasible to mount a camera in an underwater housing on the ship. ... It ends with the first underwater shots of the ship, which hopefully stands upright on the ground, ready to attract SCUBA divers from all over the world.”

It’s the same finale Weatherby, Verge and Key West Mayor Morgan McPherson are hoping for on May 15.

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