

Long Island's RXR pushes plan to bring home the SS United States, a star ocean liner from the 1950s

Five years ago, the Long Island and New York City real estate firm RXR agreed to partner with the SS United States Conservancy to save the famed ocean liner as the centerpiece of a redevelopment project. Now the company and nonprofit have released a detailed proposal they say would be financially viable and create thousands of jobs and millions in tax revenue. But the project seems unlikely to come to fruition in the fabled trans-Atlantic vessel's original home port of Manhattan because of a lack of interest by state officials.

Meanwhile, survival of the ship is threatened by litigation with the owner of the Philadelphia pier where it is moored.

The pier company doubled the rent during the COVID pandemic and sued the conservancy, seeking to evict the vessel so that property can be redeveloped. The case is expected to be heard this month, but the conservancy says it must move the ship to a new temporary home even if it wins the case.



The ocean liner SS United States, docked in Philadelphia in 2014. Credit: Newsday/Chris Ware

“A judgment against the conservancy in the litigation with Penn Warehousing over their doubling of our rent without proper notice could result in the forcible removal of the ship, significant financial duress and loss of the SS United States,” conservancy president Susan Gibbs said.

The ideal location for the ship, Uniondale-based RXR and the conservancy agree, is Pier 76 between 35th and 38th Streets in Hudson River Park near the Javits Convention Center. The pier, which is owned by the state, is used for events and impounded vehicles.

State officials have refused to discuss the project with the conservancy. Gov. Kathy Hochul's office referred a request for comment to the Hudson River Park Trust, which manages the park. The nonprofit organization responded that "at least three Hudson River Park Trust presidents have seen proposals to bring the SS United States to the park over the last 15-20 years."

"There are multiple reasons why it's not already here," the trust continued. "First, bringing any vessel to a pier requires that the pier be able to accommodate it.

"In its current physical condition, Pier 76 cannot support even a small recreational vessel let alone one the size of the SS United States, which is 990 feet long with a draft of 31 feet.

Tall obstacles

"Beyond rebuilding the pier, dredging — governed by a lengthy regulatory approvals process not controlled by the Trust — would also be required. For these reasons alone, Hudson River Park's Pier 76, and any other park location, cannot currently serve even as a temporary berthing site for the vessel."

In the long term, the trust said, "Hudson River Park is in discussions with elected officials and community stakeholders about how to achieve our dual policy goals for Pier 76: creating high quality public open space for the community, and identifying a revenue-generating use for the pier that helps support maintenance of the overall park as intended by our enabling statute." A conservancy spokesperson responded that "no governor or trust president has ever been presented with as complete and viable a plan to redevelop Pier 76.

"The grand return of the SS United States to New York's West Side as a world-class waterfront destination would ... drive substantial revenue, create jobs ... and provide the public amenities the community deserves, including acres of open, green space. Pier 76 has languished in limbo for decades as a tow pound, and as girders and asphalt."

The conservancy has now reached out to Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro to see if either will "embrace this transformative opportunity for historic preservation and waterfront economic development" in Miami or Philadelphia, Gibbs said. The partners say the redevelopment plan would work as devised in either city.

"We have long supported the conservancy in its efforts to revitalize the SS United States and return it to its former glory," RXR said last week in a statement. "Our work in this effort could be applied to many locations, and we are hopeful that the conservancy is successful in its efforts to find a permanent home."

"The SSUS is an iconic piece of American engineering and design and we're committed to finding a permanent home and restoring this one-of-a-kind luxury ocean liner into a vibrant, mixed-use destination," Scott Rechler, chairman and CEO of RXR Realty, said in a 2020 statement announcing the partnership.

The fleshed-out plan developed with hotel operator MCR Hotels would repurpose the legendary vessel as a 1,000-room hotel with restaurants and bars, museum and event venues with acres of public green space.



A rendering shows what the SS United States, redeveloped as a hotel and entertainment complex, could look like stationed at Pier 76 in Manhattan. Credit: SS United States Conservancy; RXR; MCR Hotels

The SS United States' radical design by William Francis Gibbs used more aluminum than any previous ship to make the liner light and fast. In its maiden round-trip voyages in 1952, the United States set still-unbroken trans-Atlantic ship speed records of over 40 mph. Built with assistance from the Navy to be able to be converted from luxury liner to troop transport in wartime, the SS United States was designed to carry 14,000 troops 10,000 miles without refueling. But in peacetime, it carried 1,984 passengers, including presidents and celebrities.

Retired after 17½ years of traveling to and from Europe past the South Shore of Long Island, the vessel was acquired by the federal government and then sold in the late 1970s as a series of developers examined plans to put it back into service. The ship was acquired by the conservancy in 2011.

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