



New artificial reef to lure tourists, fish

by Elizabeth Roberts

When U.S. Customs confiscated Miss Lourdis and anchored it on the Miami River, it was because the ship had 150 kilos of cocaine concealed inside a steel compartment. The way it was pitched at a District 1 meeting last month, however, the vessel would be reborn as an artificial reef and this area's own economic stimulus package.

Chad Grecsek, assistant to the director of public works, said a study of the economic impact of artificial reefs found that nonresidents and visitors to Palm Beach, Broward, Miami Dade and Monroe counties annually spend \$1.7 billion on fishing and diving activities associated with artificial reefs.

The commission's approval of a \$20,000 privately funded proposal to sink the vessel as an artificial reef was an important step toward winning the vessel. It would make Deerfield the marine equivalent of shovel ready for when custody of ship is awarded, Grecsek said.

"We want to make sure we don't lose the opportunity. These vessels cost a lot of money," said Craig Ash, general manager of Cepemar Environmental Services in Boca Raton, the company working with dive shop Dixie Divers to ease the project through the permitting process.

Plans call for the ship to be sunk astride the Broward and Palm Beach county lines.

"There are two ways to get rid of (the ship): put it out to bid —and it ends up going back into use of what brought them there in the first place—or turn it over to government and have it used for something more beneficial," Grecsek said.

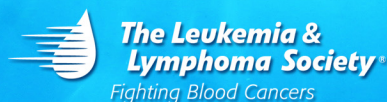
Ash said if all goes according to schedule, by mid-summer Deerfield Beach divers could be swimming out from the beach instead of driving somewhere to find the nearest artificial reef miles south.

"We just got word that the U.S. Customs case is moving forward, and by the end of March could be resolved," Ash said. "We're thinking 30 days for decommissioning." And after it is cleaned of spare parts and petroleum residue, he said, "Another 30 day to sink it—maybe middle of summer."

That would ensure a soft opening for an attraction that one study shows could add 27,000 jobs to the region and create \$782 million in wages and salaries.



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