Groups ask for virtual forum on what's next with the Golden Ray

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Jul 21, 2020

With the decisive phase of the shipwrecked Golden Ray’s removal from the St. Simons Sound imminent, Susan Inman believes it is high time Unified Command directly addresses those who matter most — the people.

The Altamaha Riverkeeper joined numerous other environmentally minded folks in the Golden Isles on Friday to request the massive project’s organizers hold a public forum. The group wants “virtual meetings” to outline the most updated plans before the salvager begins cutting the 656-foot ship into pieces, which could begin later this month.

The joint letter — which includes endorsements from One Hundred Miles, the Glynn Environmental Coalition and the Satilla Riverkeeper — requested a public airing of “the latest plan for dismantling, salvaging and cleanup of the wreckage of the Golden Ray.”

The Golden Ray has lain on its side in the St. Simons Sound since Sept. 8, when it overturned while headed out to sea with a cargo of 4,200 vehicles.
Inman, the Coastkeeper for the Altamaha Riverkeeper, noted changes to the plans since Unified Command last held public forums in February. While there have been press conferences, regular media briefings and addresses to local civic groups, Inman said Monday the general public deserves an audience with Unified Command.

“Give the people a chance to ask questions,” Inman said. “As the coastkeeper, I ask questions all the time — and I get answers. But that’s not the same as the community asking the questions. It’s their water.”

In response, Unified Command said Monday it is looking into the possibility of some form of online public forum.

“The onset of COVID-19 has impacted our outreach and ability to foster community relationships that had been developed since the incident began,” said Coast Guard Lt. Commander Dan Donovan, Unified Command’s liaison officer. “We are exploring virtual options to adopt our community outreach methods to deliver more robust online options.”

Unified Command consists of the U.S. Coast Guard, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and Gallagher Marine Systems. It is responsible for ensuring that the salvage operation adheres to environmental protection guidelines established by the federal Oil Pollution Act of 1990. Texas-based T&T Salvage is tasked with executing the operation under those guidelines.

Unified Command officials said during a press conference last month that this will be the most expensive maritime salvage operation of its kind in U.S. history. At that same press conference, officials conceded nothing like this salvaging approach has ever been attempted. The pieces of this complex operation are similarly far-ranging.

Locals are anxious for the next phase. Several alert readers emailed The News on Sunday when it appeared the mega-crane VB 10,000 was “on the move” from Fernandina to the St. Simons Sound. These folks had observed the 255-foot-tall dual-hull barge leaving the Port of Fernandina, tracking its towboats Crosby Leader and Star on marinetraffic.com.

The VB 10,000’s job will be to cut the Golden Ray into eight pieces, then hoist each piece onto a barge for transport.

It turns out, the behemoth VB 10,000 simply had to anchor offshore for the sake of commerce at the port, Coast Guardsman Michael Himes said.
“It’s a very large piece of equipment,” said Himes, a spokesman for Unified Command. “Even though it’s temporarily in the Port of Fernandina, the port still needs to have regular business. The VB 10,000 just relocated to accommodate traffic in and out of the port.”

It is not scheduled to arrive here until month’s end.

“People who were watching that (on marinetraffic.com) were wondering if it was on its way here,” Inman said of the VB 10,000’s movements.

Another big piece to the puzzle is Julie B, an expansive barge that is undergoing refitting at Mayor’s Point Terminal at the Port of Brunswick on East River. Among other things, the 400-foot-long by 130-foot-wide barge is getting walls installed around the edge of the deck. These are intended to keep oil and other pollutants from spilling over when the 2,700- to 4,100-ton cut sections of the ship are placed on it.

Julie B is just one of the big barges that will haul sections of the ship away as it’s cut up.

Unified Command originally said the entire shipwreck would be hauled to a recycling facility in Louisiana. However, officials announced last month that the four interior sections will be recycled at the Port of Brunswick. Some pieces might later be used to buttress Georgia’s offshore reefs.

As long as the sections are clean of pollutants, Inman thinks it could be a positive move.

“Our offshore reef is really flat,” she said. “So to add structure to it is a benefit for our fisheries. I understand they may not know what can go out there yet, but to give us an idea would be nice.”
Subcontractor Weeks Marine spent months building a multi-faceted environmental protection barrier around the shipwreck. The structure's mesh netting is designed to be sturdy enough to contain loose vehicles and other large debris but with gaps large enough to allow marine life free passage.

Inman said nets with smaller gaps were installed last week at the two swift-current locations on the barrier.

“We're concerned about it because the holes in this net are so small that it could increase animal entrapment,” Inman said.

Himes said marine biologists and other environmental experts are being consulted on every facet of the project, which is in keeping with Unified Command’s mission. Likewise, air and water quality indicators are monitored constantly.

“Everything we do is run, not just by best management practices for the environment, but also by our marine resource advisors,” Himes said. “We conduct marine life surveys every single day.”

Unified Command originally set a completion date before hurricane season began in June. That timeline was later adjusted to a completion prior to peak hurricane season.

It now looks as though the project will run well into September, at least.

Inman does not doubt that Unified Command has the best interest of the public and the environment in mind. She just thinks the public deserves to hear it first-hand.

“Transparency is all we're asking for,” Inman said. “I don’t know if there’s just so much uncertainty and flexibility in the plan at this point. But there are questions they can answer. It’s been very quiet lately. I understand things are moving forward, yet the community’s being left out.”

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