

Navy moves commissioning of USS Mississippi sub from Gulfport to Pascagoula; city leaders thrilled

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Sailors assigned to the Virginia-class attack submarine Pre-Commissioning Unit (PCU) Mississippi (SSN 782) file off the ship after it was christened by ship sponsor Allison Stiller during a ceremony at the General Dynamics Electric Boat shipyard. Mississippi is the fifth U.S. Navy ship to bear the name of the Magnolia State and the ninth Virginia-class submarine. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Navy)

PASCAGOULA, Mississippi -- The USS Mississippi will be commissioned in Pascagoula rather than Gulfport, U.S. Rep. Steven Palazzo and Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus announced Tuesday.

USS Mississippi is the Navy's newest attack submarine. It was christened in Connecticut in December. The news that the commissioning, a significant event that draws thousands of people including top Navy officials, comes amid rumblings that dredging at the port of Gulfport was not going well.

According to its website, the Port of Gulfport is maintained to depths of 32 to 36 feet. A port representative could not be reached Tuesday evening.

The port of Pascagoula, meanwhile, is 38 feet deep. "That vessel could come in tomorrow if it wanted to," port Director Mark McAndrews said. He said that Pascagoula port officials have been in talks with the Navy about utilizing the facilities, and that Navy reps have paid several visits.

"I believe our facilities will be more than adequate to accommodate the ship and the crowds," McAndrews said. He said that details were still being worked out such as at which terminal in the harbor the ceremonies will take place. He said he would likely be able to provide further details today.

Pascagoula's City Council's Tuesday meeting was abuzz with excitement of the news, which Mayor Robbie Maxwell said he received earlier that day via a phone call from Palazzo.

City leaders cheered the venue change, something they said they have been trying to persuade the Navy to do since Day One. The Gulfport locale was announced as the commissioning locale in early August.

"We've just got the most experience hosting such events," Councilman Harold Tillman said. "It makes more sense."

Ingalls Shipbuilding has hosted countless events, from christenings to commissionings.

Councilman Frank Corder added that taxpayers would no longer have to foot the bill for dredging.

Commissionings are typically preceded by parties, tours and ceremonies, and can bring a significant economic impact to the cities and areas in which they're held. Commissioning of the Austal-built littoral combat ship Independence, for instance, brought about 3,000 people to Mobile's riverfront several years ago despite torrential rain.

It doesn't cost anything to attend a commissioning, but one must have an invitation from the Navy. Pascagoula city leaders said perhaps the only down side to hosting a commissioning is that there won't be enough suitable hotel rooms in Jackson County to house visitors. However, that will mean the wealth will be spread along the entire coast.

Palazzo, who is from Gulfport, has told The Mississippi Press that he does not care whether the sub is "christened in Natchez or Gulfport or Pascagoula, as long as it is done in Mississippi."

Palazzo is a member of the SeaPower and Projection Forces Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, and said his office has worked with Mabus over the past year to make sure that the commissioning takes place in Mississippi.

"I appreciate all the hard work community leaders from both Pascagoula and Gulfport did to bring the commissioning to Mississippi," he said. "From the veterans who served and worked to make this happen, to the shipbuilders who equip our nation's warfighters, this is a proud day for Mississippi."

The Mississippi is the latest in the Virginia class of submarines, which are built in partnership between Groton-based Electric Boat and Newport News Shipbuilding at a cost of about \$2.6 billion each. They carry torpedoes as well as Tomahawk missiles, and have features including a torpedo room that can be reconfigured to hold Navy SEALs.

The 7,800-ton submarine will carry a crew of 132 officers and sailors, led by Navy Capt. John McGrath, on standard deployments of six months. Its nuclear reactor is designed to power the submarine for its service life of 30 years or longer, propelling the sub at speeds exceeding 25 knots submerged.

It is the ninth member of a new generation of attack subs hailed as the world's most complex pieces of machinery.