

## **Catching the World's Fastest Ocean Liner for Philadelphia**

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We join maritime enthusiasts, preservationists, and design buffs in thanking Gerry and Marguerite Lenfest for the gift that will enable the SS United States Conservancy to purchase the SS United States and rescue the fastest ocean liner ever built -- a 45,000-ton object capable of traveling at fifty miles per hour. But now it's up to us Philadelphians to figure out how to keep this extraordinary combination of beauty and technological prowess on the Delaware, where she has berthed safely since 1996.

The SS United States Conservancy is looking for a public-private partnership to develop the ship as a museum combined with other functions; a hotel, restaurant, and conference center come to mind. In this time of economic gloom, such a partnership will be difficult to assemble. But Philadelphia has a combination of great resources already on hand. And we have a number of pressing needs that this mighty ship can serve. Let's make use of this extraordinary opportunity.

First, we are a great seaport city, one that nurtured the imagination of the SS United States' designer, Philadelphia-born William Francis Gibbs. We have a top-notch maritime museum on the waterfront, and in the harbor you can already visit three historic warships (USS Olympia, USS Becuna, and USS New Jersey) and two graceful sailing vessels, the bark Mosholu and barkentine Gazela. That's critical mass for a new kind of tourist destination, an outdoor museum of our maritime past. Wouldn't visitors like to sleep aboard one of these marvelous ships?

Second, we have now taken the first thoughtful steps toward creating a Master Plan for the central Delaware River waterfront, which promises to reconnect the city to its river, with a high premium placed on publicly accessible amenities. But much of the waterfront consists of vacant lots -- a blank slate. Shouldn't we find a place in the plan for the SS United States? What if you could see her red funnels at the foot of, say, Market Street, beckoning you to come down to the river?

Third, we will soon inaugurate an expanded Pennsylvania Convention Center that is about twice as large as the existing facility. However, we still need almost 1,200 new hotel rooms for those who will be coming to town. With the

planned PATCO light rail connection from Center City to the waterfront, what would be more appealing than spending the night aboard the ship that brought Monaco's Prince Rainier to America to court Philadelphia's Grace Kelly?

Fourth, we now have one, and perhaps two riverfront casinos, and while both plan to build hotels eventually, there is nothing now in the works. Why not make use of one of the most beautiful residential facilities created during the twentieth century to provide the wanted hotel space, just a short trolley ride away from the casinos? Or perhaps even have the second casino in the ship itself?

The SS United States is an icon of a great era of American style and technological supremacy. Philadelphia can celebrate our contribution to those accomplishments while satisfying our important needs. We can add a capstone to our collection of historical attractions, acquire additional hotel rooms, and create a unique, highly visible attraction on a waterfront that is being redesigned to serve residents and visitors alike.

Let's be as generous with our imagination as the Lenfests have been with their money and come together to create a compelling vision and a confidence-inspiring plan to keep the SS United States in Philadelphia.

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