



Rhode Island news

NOAA's newest vessel may land in Quonset

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Robert Ballard, Titanic explorer and a professor at the University of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Oceanography, will be among the researchers to use the Okeanos Explorer.

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NORTH KINGSTOWN

A ship designed to probe the world's oceans may soon call Rhode Island home, Sen. Jack Reed said yesterday.

The Okeanos Explorer, still under construction, will be used by leading researchers and scientists, including Titanic explorer Robert Ballard, a professor at the University of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Oceanography.

This spring the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will conduct an environmental review of Quonset Point and Davisville as a possible port for the ship, Reed said.

The site makes sense because it is close to many labs and universities, NOAA officials said.

“Okeanos Explorer will break the mold for the way the nation conducts at-sea research in the future. We have better maps of Mars and the far side of the moon than of the deep and remote regions of Earth,” said NOAA administrator and retired Navy Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher Jr.

In 2005, Reed and other congressmen secured \$18 million for NOAA to convert a former Navy surveillance vessel, the USNS Capable, into the Okeanos Explorer.

At the same time, Reed and Governor Carcieri asked Lautenbacher and NOAA officials to make Rhode Island the home port for the ship.

Yesterday, the two men called NOAA’s plan a potential boon for the state and URI’s oceanography department.

“This new vessel, the first of its kind for NOAA, will provide us with fascinating new information about our oceans and help keep Rhode Island on the cutting edge of ocean exploration and research,” said Reed.

Carcieri said he has long argued that the state “can and should be one of America’s leading centers of oceanic research.” Bringing Okeanos to North Kingstown “will enable our state to build on the research capacity we’ve already developed at URI, while also exploiting the potential of Quonset Point/Davisville as a launching point for exploring the ocean’s untapped and largely unknown resources.”

Ballard, president of the Institute for Exploration at Connecticut’s Mystic Aquarium, also played a role in securing the Navy ship, Reed said. The professor and explorer has helped “us gain a greater understanding of what lies underneath the surface of our oceans and seas.”

The vessel was transferred from the Navy to NOAA in 2004. A Seattle shipyard will finish part of the conversion this summer. When completed in the spring of 2008, Okeanos will have deep-water robots and hull-mounted sonar for mapping the sea floor. The ship will be able to transmit sound and images to onshore centers and will be able to “unlock clues to the world’s oceans — of which 95 percent remains unexplored,” Lautenbacher said.

Already, a team of oceanographers from across the country are planning the ship’s first voyage, a 2008 Hawaiian launch that will explore the Pacific, the world’s largest and least explored ocean.

The ship will also maintain close ties to a new communications center to be built on URI’s Narragansett campus. Called the Inner Space Center, it will be the ocean equivalent to NASA’s space command center in Houston, NOAA said. The center will be able to link to Okeanos via a satellite and make it possible for scientists and educators to participate in ocean exploration without stepping foot on the ship.

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