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FEBRUARY/MARCH 2010 VOL.25 NO.1 \$5.95

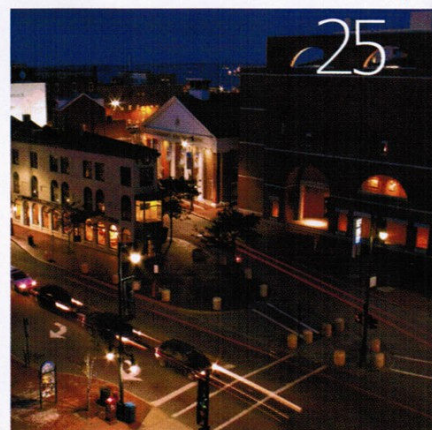
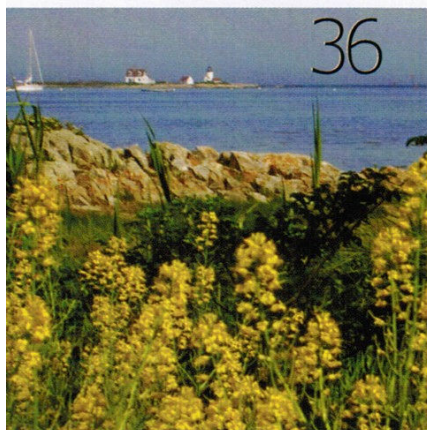


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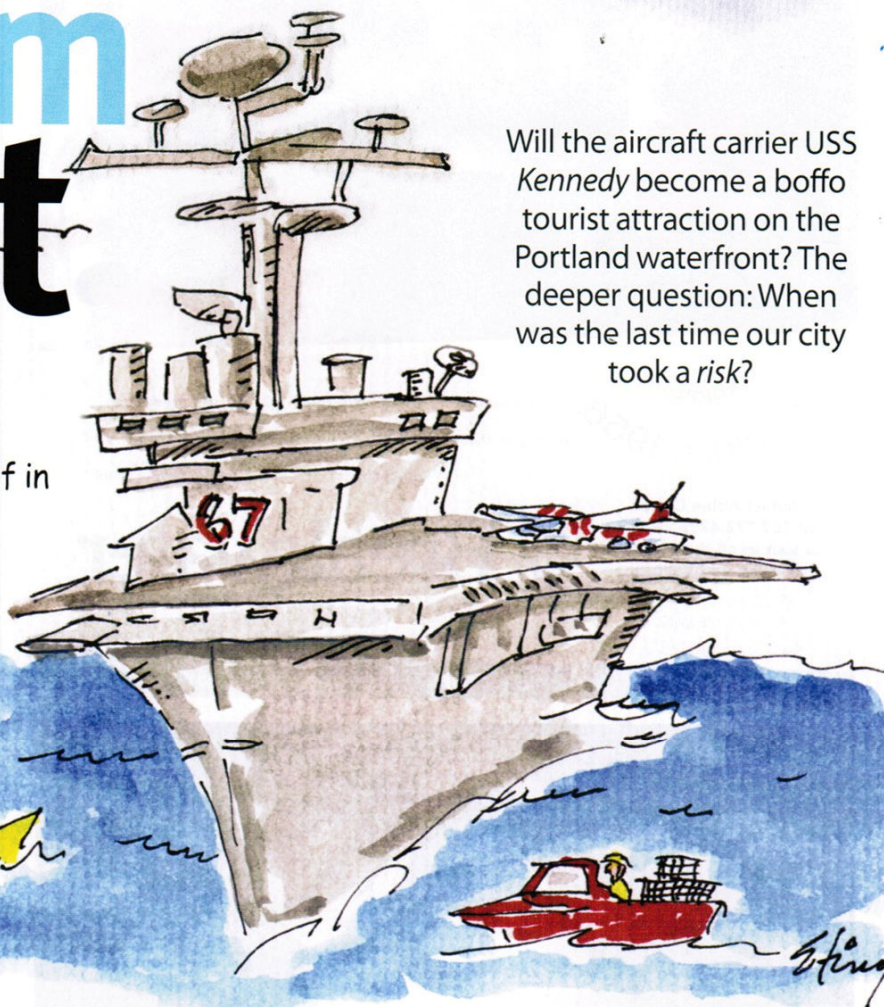
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# Dream Boat



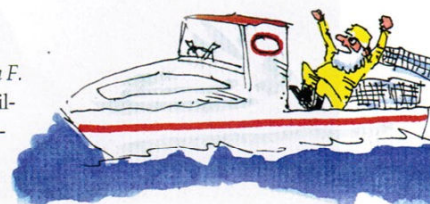
Will the aircraft carrier USS Kennedy become a boffo tourist attraction on the Portland waterfront? The deeper question: When was the last time our city took a risk?



BY JASON STEVENSON

There are many ways to see the USS *John F. Kennedy*. Driving Interstate 95 near Philadelphia, you can spot the aircraft carrier's T-shaped radar mast looming over rusty warehouses. Looking down from a plane on final approach to the airport, you can marvel at her flight deck that's as long as three football fields. And from a concrete pier jutting into the Delaware River, your gaze can climb the gray steel hull to see pigeons landing where warplanes once soared. No matter your vantage point, this decommissioned carrier sits as silent and empty as a ghost ship. For two years, the *JFK* has inhabited this lonely berth on the outskirts of Philadelphia, attracting little attention from the fashionably-dressed employees of a nearby design studio.

But last November, the *JFK*'s limbo status changed when the Navy decided to donate the 42-year-old carrier as a floating museum and memorial similar to the USS *Intrepid* in New York City. Suddenly, like an aging starlet given a final shot at fame,







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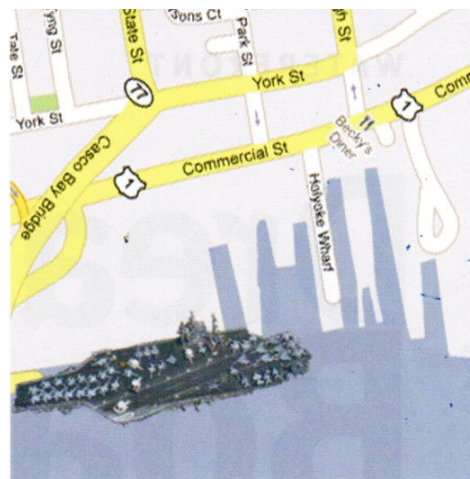
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the spotlight shone again on the *JFK* as civic boosters up and down the East Coast dreamed of snagging this charismatically named ship.

### ENTER PORTLAND

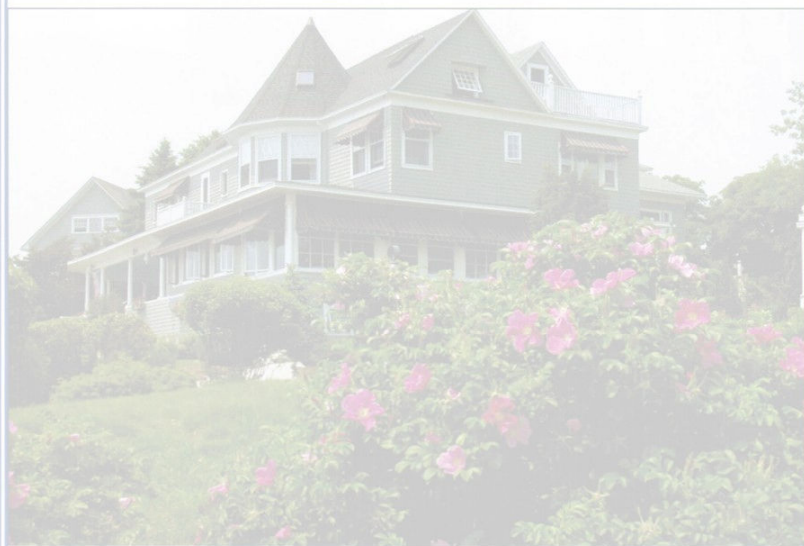
Portland, as it turns out, is home to a group of those dreamers. "We feel the *JFK* will be a wonderful addition to the waterfront skyline of Portland and South Portland," says Richard Fitzgerald, a director of the newly-formed USS *John F. Kennedy* Museum, a local non-profit seeking the carrier for Maine's largest city. On January 4, Portland City Council unanimously endorsed their efforts, while Gov. John Baldacci also offered his support. But landing any retired warship, let alone a 60,000-ton supercarrier that's 50 feet longer than Maine State Pier, is a multi-year and multi-million-dollar task. Fitzgerald says his group is up to the challenge, but veterans of the Navy's donation process offer a warning. "You have to be fanatical to get these ships," says F.W. "Rocco" Montesano, director of the USS *Lexington* Museum on the Bay in Corpus Christi, Texas. "But fanatics aren't usually the best people to run them."

### MAKING THE GRADE

Dreams and fanatics aside, the Navy runs its three-phase donation process on a strict timetable, and the first make-or-break deadline for the first phase fell in late January. As a result, Portland could be disqualified by the time this article is published. Or, it could be the only city in the Northeast still vying for the ship. Either way, Portland's ambitions are once again entwined with maritime history, and its residents must ponder—literally—how big a dream can a city dare?



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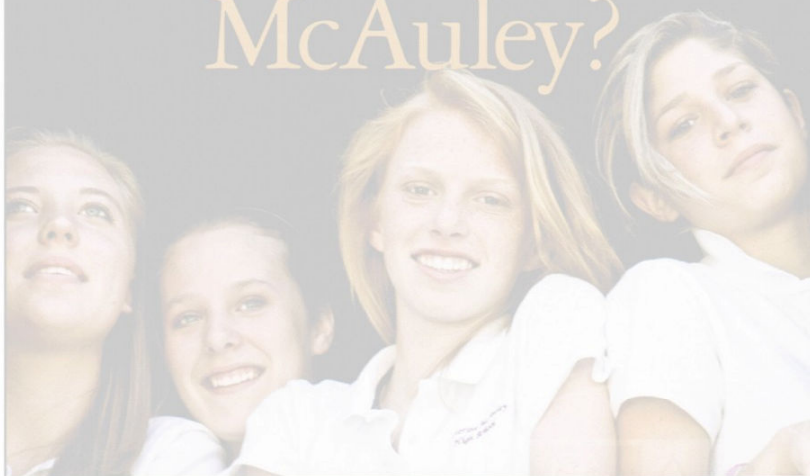


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## WATERFRONT

### WHERE WOULD SHE GO?

If Portland were to win the *JFK*, the most obvious question would be, where to put her? Fitzgerald is guarded about specifics, but he does allow that the ship would be moored in the harbor, with the exact location up to city officials. "If they tell us to put it on Cumberland Avenue, we'll put it there," he jokes. Realistically, only a few places could accommodate a ship that's 1,052 feet long with a 30-foot draft. "One place that might work would be off the Eastern Promenade near the sewage treatment plant and Fort Allen Park," suggests Jeff Monroe, the city's former port director and now an executive at Halifax-based MacDonnell Group. "Dredging the shoreline could create a channel and protected berth for a deep-draft carrier, similar to what Long Beach did for the *Queen Mary*," he adds. At this stage, however, a precise location isn't required. "Most applications will move to the second phase unless they are proposing a location that physically can't work," says Glen Clark, deputy program manager for the Navy's Inactive Ships Program, and one of the officials who reviews the applications.

### PHASE TWO

Identifying a suitable anchorage, however, is just one hurdle to overcome. If Portland is invited to compete in the second phase, Fitzgerald's group will have one year to submit a detailed business plan, fundraising program, and environmental impact statements. "It's a very daunting process and appropriately so," says Scott McGaugh, marketing director for the USS *Midway* Museum in San Diego. He estimates his group raised \$8 million and submitted 3,000 pages during the 12 years it took to acquire the *Midway*. Their success, McGaugh offers, was due to three factors: an accessible location; a long-term, business-savvy board; and leadership that transitioned from visionaries to managers. "I've talked with 15 cities like Portland, and most failed because they didn't realize that getting the ship to town is nothing compared to running it as a successful, viable business," he adds. In McGaugh's estimation, the Navy is like a demanding banker looking to make a zero-risk loan.

### SHOW ME THE MONEY

"If the *JFK* ever came to Portland, the public would get stuck paying millions of dol-

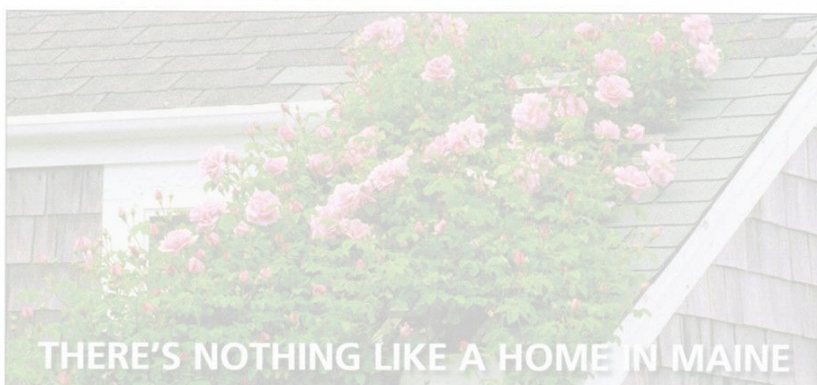


lars to maintain it," says Steven Scharf, a Portland resident active in conservative politics. Scharf, who opposes the *JFK* donation, points to the USS *Yorktown*, an aging aircraft carrier based in Charleston, South Carolina, that faces \$100 million in dry-dock repairs and no plan—except for a public bailout—to pay for it. Even discounting expensive overhauls, most ship museums can't support themselves from ticket sales alone and must rely on grants, donations, and fund-raisers to fill their budgets. Another concern is that museum ships have reached a saturation point, with almost every East Coast city hosting a submarine, destroyer, or other naval attraction. "There's just not enough room for two aircraft carriers between New York and Maine," warns Francis Lennon, president of a group trying to lure the USS *Saratoga*, a carrier similar in size to the *JFK*, to Rhode Island. Plus, local Portland non-profits are concerned that the *JFK*'s fund-raising efforts will exhaust the region's already meager donors.

#### ONE MORE MISSION

"They need to think outside the box," is Fitzgerald's response to critics. To raise the millions of dollars to acquire and maintain the *JFK*, his group plans to cash in on the national appeal of its presidential name. "Why wouldn't you support a project that is totally funded by deep-pocketed donors outside the city when all the money will be invested inside the harbor?" Fitzgerald asks. Plus, he notes that the USS *John F. Kennedy* Association—a group representing the carrier's former crew members—has pledged to generate publicity and raise funds for Portland's bid. But most of all, Fitzgerald says he is confident that Portland can win the *JFK* based on community support. "When we first discussed this project, we figured Portland's chances were 1 in 150 million," he says. "But when the council passed the resolution, those odds dropped to 1 in 10." Now he's hoping Portland residents, especially those who remember the *JFK*'s last port call in October 1989, will join the effort to make the USS *John F. Kennedy* Museum, like Portland Head Light, a nationally recognized landmark that makes the whole city proud. ■

Coming in March: [ussjfk.org](http://ussjfk.org), a website for the USS *John F. Kennedy* Museum, Portland. A former staff editor at *Outside* and *Backpacker* magazines, Jason Stevenson writes for *Wired*, *Men's Journal*, *Boston*, and *Runner's World*. » Visit Online Extras at [portlandmonthly.com](http://portlandmonthly.com) for more images.



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## “If I Were Governor...”

Where do Maine's gubernatorial candidates stand on bringing the *JFK* to Portland Harbor?

I support the coming of the *John F. Kennedy* to Portland. Having the ship in Maine waters is an opportunity for revenue to come to Maine. This will allow an increase of people-traffic to come to businesses' sidewalks, plus a lot more opportunities for the history of Maine with Bath Iron Works.

—Augustus J. Edgerton (I)

It's unlikely that private fund-raising will cover even the transportation costs. The multi-million-dollar maintenance will inevitably fall to the city of Portland. There are far less expensive ways to boost tourism.

—Peter Mills (R)

Yes, if it would create some type of secondary or after-market industry that could provide stable, long-term employment with benefits, not just sporadic or seasonal work.

—Samme Bailey (I)

Yes, I am in support of the USS *John F. Kennedy* coming to Portland due to the history surrounding President Kennedy himself. He was a positive inspiration to many younger people to get involved in politics. Many of today's Democrats in office are directly due to President Kennedy's impact on politics.

—Peter Truman (D)

I am very much in support of that. It would attract tourism, and it would support the military and be patriotic. My only concern would be if the ship was nuclear powered, as I am very anti-nuclear.

—Christopher Cambron (D)

I'm a huge supporter, as long as it didn't cost the taxpayers extra money. It should be voluntary on the taxpayers' part, and they should be involved in any discussion of how to fund it. I served aboard the USS *Thresher*, so I have an affinity for naval vessels, and I think it would be a great tourist attraction.

—J. Martin Vachon (R)

It's a wonderful thing, bringing it to Maine and turning it into a museum. I can't imagine how the *JFK* wouldn't be a major tourist attraction. It would be wonderful.

—Paul LaPage (R)

Before I could consider such a proposal, I'd have to see a plan detailing private financing and logistics—such as where the carrier would be anchored.

—Steve Abbott (R)

Yes, I am in favor. I think it would be fascinating to explore a ship of that size. I think it would be a great learning tool, and it would no doubt give a boost to the local waterfront economy.

—John Whitcomb (I)

I support bringing the *JFK* to Portland. The thing that we'll miss most from NAS Brunswick's closing is the demonstration of service in our community. Without that first-hand experience, Maine children will miss the lesson that our country is special and that dedicated men and women spend their lives defending it and us at great personal cost and risk.

—Matt Jacobson (R)

My initial reaction is that it would be great to have a floating historical museum covering 40 years of history. But a quick yes or no should never happen to any recommendations made to increase tourism. We must always do our homework in looking at the pluses and minuses of bringing the ship to Portland.

—Donna J. Dion (D)

I think having it will encourage tourists to visit the area and offer a venue for many exciting events for Maine people. We need to make sure it fits into the vision for a vibrant working waterfront. What an opportunity to promote historic preservation and teaching!

—Elizabeth “Libby” Mitchell (D)

An aircraft carrier in Casco Bay would exemplify Maine's maritime and naval heritage and our strategic military and economic location as America's closest seaport to the European Union and North Atlantic.

—Bill Beardsley (R)

Yes. This is a part of our history. It's always important to preserve our history, and if we can do that in Portland, then that's great.

—Lynne Williams (I)

I support the efforts to bring the USS *Kennedy* to Portland as long as it can be operated and maintained as a floating museum through private funding, not state tax dollars.

—Eliot Cutler (I)

Bringing the USS *John F. Kennedy* to Maine, either as a permanent attraction or as part of a temporary exhibition, is a great idea. Tourism equals jobs in Maine.

—Les Otten (R)

I think it is a wonderful idea. I am in support as long as the organization can support the project. I'd need to see financial projections for three to five years before approval.

—Beverly Cooper-Pete (I)

I support the idea generally. However, issues such as berthing location, impact on other port activities, and funding must be considered. It should boost tourism and be a tribute to veterans.

—Steve Rowe (D)

The local community would need to be interested. If Portland were interested, then I would use the influence of the office of governor to make it happen.

—John Richardson (D)

Though an interesting proposal, costs and benefits must be carefully weighed, and all stakeholders heard—particularly Portlanders, who might ultimately bear the cost, perhaps indefinitely, should the venture go awry.

—Rosa Searcelli (D)

I would support that. I was brought into politics by John F. Kennedy. I was on board when that ship was decommissioned in Boston, and I'd love to land an airplane on it!

—Patrick McGowan (D)

Yes, I would support bringing the USS *JFK* to Portland and believe it would be an interesting tourist attraction.

—Bruce Poliquin (R)