

Get Me To

Acknowledging effective projects and people is only half the goal of BoatU.S.'s Recreational Boating Access Awards, started in 2007. We also seek to provide information, share contacts, and inspire other boaters to work with their community leaders and groups to stem the tide on losing their access to the waterfront. The winning projects presented here required patience, perseverance, and open communication with the community. Meet last year's winners, who hope to assist you and other boaters in preserving and protecting access to the water.

Beyond Perseverance On Lake Superior

Developing public access to the water can be a time-consuming process but northern Minnesota boaters didn't think it would take the patience of Job to get a launching area built on Lake Superior near Duluth. When the McQuade Public Access and Small Craft Harbor officially opened last July 18, it marked the culmination of 16 years of collaboration, consultation, and sometimes-contentious negotiation. That's right. The project took more than a decade and a half of feasibility studies, public meetings, land-use planning, more public meetings, design work, yet more meetings, legal negotiations, and — what else? — more meetings, at least 144 in all. That's what it took to make the process work, according to retired city planner Bill Majewski, whose involvement actually goes back even farther and who became unofficial "historian" for the grand opening.

Today, the \$11 million project boasts a harbor of just

With boaters in some parts of the country losing access to the water, BoatU.S. created the annual Recreational Boating Access Awards to recognize success in preserving or improving waterway access. The 2008 winners are an inspiration

By Ryck Lydecker

The Water

over three acres, three launching ramps plus a separate kayak ramp, trailer parking for 54 vehicles as well as 23 car-only spaces, three shore-fishing platforms, solar lighting and public walkways for non-boaters, all protected by two massive stone breakwaters. After all, *this* is the lake that swallowed the 730-foot iron-ore carrier *Edmund Fitzgerald*. Construction started in the spring of 2005 and many veterans of the project say building it was the easy part.

The idea for a small-craft harbor on Superior's rocky, exposed shore somewhere along the 18-mile reach from Duluth to Knife River was discussed as early as 1975, Majewski recalls. But the concept didn't get to the serious conversation stage until 1982 when the Western Lake Superior Trollers Association suggested the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) build a boat launching site on city-owned land. Formal plans for such a harbor, unveiled in 1989, met stiff opposition.



Margaret Podlich of BoatU.S. (center right) presents a 2008 Boating Access award to the city of Gulfport, Florida for its planned new mooring field for local and transient boaters.



It was a long time coming but Lake Superior boaters have a new launching area and harbor of refuge near Duluth, Minnesota, and a 2008 Boating Access Award to show for it.



These two young boaters probably weren't even born when planning began for a much-needed new launching area for western Lake Superior.

"It was nearly the start of a civil war in Duluth, pitting neighbor against neighbor," Majewski recalls. "The city and the DNR suffered a proverbial public flogging that wouldn't soon be forgotten." But local boaters and anglers kept the idea alive, and by 1992 the then-mayor appointed a "Duluth Safe Harbor Committee" with membership from all sides and a mandate to find answers. "The grassroots planning concept was new and unfamiliar," Majewski says. "The bitter words and deep scars were fresh; trust was not the flavor of the day."

Nonetheless, the group agreed to decision-by-consensus, abandoning majority rule, and nailed down definitions. By the next year it delivered a statement recognizing "a legitimate desire to provide a means of access with appropriate safety for boaters and the public that will protect and enhance each group's desire to enjoy and protect the environment."

If there's one lesson to be learned, Majewski reports, it's to keep the public aware and involved "as an active participant in every step of the process." What he calls the "fish-bowl planning model" stayed in effect from the first committee meeting 16 years earlier through the grand opening celebration last summer. It took four units of local government; representatives of boating, fishing, and environmental groups; as well as the state DNR, the Minnesota Sea Grant Program, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers providing technical expertise, to get the job done. But it proved worth it — the site logged 2,000 launches before the end of the '08 season. (For more information: www.dnr.state.mn.us/water_access/harbors/mcquade.html)

A Sense Of Vision On Lake Erie

About 800 water miles and three lakes downstream from the Duluth project, the City of Sheffield Lake, Ohio, also overcame initial opposition to developing a small-boat launching area on Lake Erie. And while the process to develop a vacant and neglected waterfront parcel took just five years — not 16 as in Duluth — in a curious coincidence, the Community Park

Boat Launch opened the same day, July 18, 2008. The two projects have much in common.

"For decades small-craft owners in Sheffield Lake faced a closed-in lakefront with no place to launch for at least six miles," reports William Gardner, the city's now-retired service director who saw the project through from start to finish.

"The city owned a non-descript 'park' on the water across the street from a run-down shopping center that cut off our ability to put in adequate parking for a boat launching area," Gardner explains, as he ticks off the list of obstacles boating advocates faced: a disheartened citizenry with "no waterfront vision," a less-than-enthusiastic board at the adjacent public library, a skeptical Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the potential primary funding source, and finally the shopping center's "hostile" owner.

Enter the man with the vision, Mayor John Piskura, who instituted various environmental studies that showed little potential impact, an economic study that demonstrated the project could help revitalize commercial opportunity, and an open invitation to all the cities in Lorain County to be part of the process and gain free access to the lake for their citizens.

"After five years of negotiation, public outcry, building violations and legal action," says Gardner, "the shopping center granted the city a lease for the overflow parking we needed to meet DNR requirements for funding." (Contact Bill Gardner: williamgardner@yahoo.com)

Model Planning In Coastal Carolina

Like the other states in the Southeast, North Carolina has seen water access for boaters and anglers disappear in recent years as developers gobble up waterfront and convert existing marinas to residential use. Except in Morehead City, that is, where local government had been working methodically for nearly 10 years to preserve water access for citizens and visitors alike. That's the reason BoatU.S. presented one of its 2008 Boating Access Awards to the mayor, the city manager, the parks and recreation director, and the entire town council.

"Morehead City recognized loss of water access as a serious

problem years before state or county governments did,” reports Connie Asero, an avid boater who also heads the downtown revitalization program. “Organized citizen advocacy for water-access projects and grant programs to make them happen were almost non-existent but government officials were willing to listen to a few concerned voices — then act.”

With remarkable foresight, city government began a step-by-step approach in 1998 to not only preserve water access within the municipality, but actually expand it. Efforts began with developing small neighborhood access sites for hand-launched watercraft, to larger sites with ramps for trailer boats. Then the city even purchased a small island just off its waterfront, making it into a nature preserve that also protects visiting boats from wakes coming off the adjacent ICW.

Morehead City won a federal Boating Infrastructure Grant in 2007 (and another this year, see story page 19) to install slips for transient boaters cruising the waterway while also beginning work on a new 10-ramp launching area with parking for over 150 towing rigs. Local governments in North Carolina and elsewhere are now using Morehead City as a model. (Contact Connie Asero: dmcra@embarqmail.com or visit www.downtownmoreheadcity.com)

Changing Towing Laws In North Carolina

It’s one thing to have adequate launching areas but first you have to be able to get your boat to the ramp. One BoatU.S. Boating Access Award went to a state legislator who helped North Carolina boaters solve a trailer-ing conundrum last year. The law then on the books limited towing a boat and trailer combination any wider than 8½ feet to daylight hours only. It also excluded towing on Sundays and on certain holidays — exactly when many trailer boats need to be on the road — and required a state permit.

In a textbook example of grassroots activism in the Internet Age, trailer boaters, tournament anglers, and a coalition of North Carolina-based boatbuilders, including Grady-White and Parker Marine, lobbied successfully to change the law, only to see the governor veto the measure. That’s when bill sponsor, State Representative Arthur Williams (D-Dist. 6), campaigned citizens to contact lawmakers in Raleigh, and in the single-day session, they overturned the veto. One lawmaker said he “got more mail and phone calls on this issue than I ever got on taxes.” (Contact Robin Parker: robin@parkerboats.net)

Now Welcoming Boaters In Gulfport

For years, derelict boats littered Florida’s Boca Ciega Bay off the Gulf of Mexico near Tampa. During storms, some abandoned boats washed ashore on private property or blew into city piers, generating understandable ill will among residents and city officials. The City of Gulfport enacted ordinances on anchoring and even strict limits on vessel visits that, to many boaters, seemed anti-boating. Indeed, says Cindy Davis of the Boca Ciega Yacht Club, Gulfport gained a reputation for being hostile toward boating.

The solution? Develop a managed mooring field to serve both residents and visiting boaters, and promote responsible use of the waterways. Sounds good, but it proved anything but easy to convince some residents. In 2005, Florida passed a “working waterfront” law to help stem the tide of access loss. Subsequent studies demonstrated that the mooring-field concept could help accomplish its aims. Thus, Gulfport officials and citizens used the full suite of public-process planning tools

to develop a Harbor Management Plan. In 2008 the city council and the Pinellas County Commission approved plans for a mooring field that can accommodate 50 boats and be expanded to 100. Oh, and the city’s reputation? It’s bound to change. The local chamber of commerce has created a “welcome packet” that’s delivered to visiting boaters. (For info: BWorthington@ci.gulfport.fl.us, or www.ci.gulfport.fl.us.)

Sunshine Shortcut

It’s fair to say that lots of cruisers who visit Gulfport will eventually find themselves cutting across the Sunshine State via Florida’s unique east-west route through Lake Okeechobee. On the lake’s southwest shore, at the entrance to the Caloosahatchee Canal leading to the Gulf of Mexico, lies the city of Moore Haven, site of a public-private partnership that earned the final BoatU.S. Boating Access Award last year. Here a private marina operator is redeveloping a run-down facility in the first phase of a three-step waterfront revitalization plan. When rebuilt, the Moore Haven Marina will bring new income to an economically depressed community. Plans call for dredging, boat-ramp renovation, and new shoreside facilities to serve transients and local boaters alike.

According to John Smith, general manager for the project, a combination of grants and private investment is making it possible to revive this otherwise unusable, unsafe facility that has suffered severe hurricane damage. But in an interesting twist, Smith and his firm, River Forest Yachting Center in Stuart, on Florida’s Atlantic coast, are helping the city *pro bono*. “We have no financial interest in this,” he explains. “We saw the opportunity for the city. We had the resources and know-how. We got involved.”

That approach prompted the local business and professional community to commit \$750,000 in cash and in-kind contributions. Smith and his team secured donated labor, materials, and engineering services, and even negotiated a discount on a new 450-foot floating dock. The BoatU.S. award goes to both the River Forest Yachting Center and the City of Moore Haven. (Contact John Smith: jsmith@riverforestyc.com)

Get In Touch

All the people in this article welcome the opportunity to share what they’ve learned. Their experiences could inspire you, save you time and money, and be your first step in helping your community to create new access points to the waterfront we all love so much.

Ryck Lydecker is associate editor of BoatU.S. Magazine, focusing on government affairs and boating access issues.

Nominations For 2009 BoatU.S. Access Awards Now Open

BoatU.S. is now accepting nominations for the 2009 Recreational Boating Access Awards. Applications will be accepted through October 1, 2009; winners will be announced by October 31. (Previous entrants are not eligible.) For information, judging criteria, and application forms, or to see previous winners: www.BoatUS.com/gov/AccessAward.