

Brooklyn Boaters Save Barren Island Marina

Case Study: How Local Organizing Turned the Tide

Brooklyn boat owners owe a vote of thanks to a small band of citizens who took on City Hall and won. In this case, "City Hall" was the National Park Service which decided last April to close Brooklyn's Barren Island Marina on Jamaica Bay in the Gateway National Recreation Area.

The decision to close it on October 1, with no warning, much less public hearings, caught the marina's 280 slip holders by surprise. "Our studies indicate continued operation of a marina at this site is not feasible," the curt April 17 National Park Service (NPS) letter read.

With little alternative docking and winter storage available in the area, the decision brought boat owners together for a fight. Civil disobedience ranked high on some lists — march on Gateway headquarters; run sailboats through the Belt Parkway drawbridge constantly to dramatize their plight — were just a few options.

Fortunately, BOAT/U.S. member Harold Hohne and fellow sailor Phil Parian, had cooler heads — and a plan. Within weeks they formed the Barren Island Marina Boaters Association (BIMBA) to speak with a single voice on behalf of everyone ("It was my idea so who do you think got elected president?" says Hohne). Elected to the six-member steering committee were BOAT/U.S. members Edwin Rudetsky and William Woodroffe, who also serves as BIMBA vice president.

One of the first tasks was to build a database in Hohne's home computer with names of all slip holders, every elected official — from Brooklyn Borough Hall and Albany to Washington, DC — who could possibly help, and every radio, TV, newspaper and other media outlet that might cover the issue.

Then the fledgling organization began to frame its case for keeping the

marina open. Hohne and the association board divvied up the tasks: publicity, letter-writing, budget, research, newsletter. Freedom of Information Act requests brought in NPS documents to help make the case for keeping the 16 year-old marina open.

"We didn't go into this to pick a fight with Gateway or the National Park Service," Hohne told *BOAT/U.S. Magazine*. "We were puzzled and amazed by the sudden decision to close the marina when slip occupancy was increasing. We wanted to work with the Park Service to solve the problems they were having."

After a spring and early summer of letter writing, public meetings with NPS staff and elected officials, and media interviews, Hohne and the association had pushed the issue up the Washington chain of command. And they got, not just the ear, but the active support of Rep. Charles Schumer, a Democrat who represents that portion of Brooklyn in Congress. Additional research, more correspondence and high-level meetings followed, and by late summer they had turned the tide in their favor.

Sept. 8 turned out to be a winning day for Hohne. He started the day in his Catalina 25 by taking first in class and first overall in the Rockaway Point Yacht Club Sunday Regatta series. Then he spent the afternoon of this Grandparent's Day at an association meeting. There 7-year-old Caitlin and 2-1/2 year old Tim got to celebrate their grandpa's victory when Schumer read a letter from Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt saying that the marina would remain open after all.

The letter stated that NPS would extend the current agreement with the temporary marina operator and issue a



Rep. Charles Schumer, left, addresses a rally of Barren Island slipholders.

prospectus for a permanent operator in the next few months.

Hohne, who is retired from a 39-year career in telecommunications, said computer skills he and other steering committee members had made organizing the association and carrying out its many tasks easier. But tapping the talents and personal contacts within the membership, he feels, made the Barren Island Marina Boaters Association effective.

"From the start we tried to identify the players who would make the organization work," Hohne said. "You have to ask people, 'What can you do to help us?' People will get involved if asked."

Frequent contact with BOAT/U.S. Government Affairs and Schumer also played a key role in giving the issue prominence in the right places. Hohne kept the Congressman's New York office apprised of every new development by hand-delivering correspondence and new documents, often as much as two or three times a week. He also kept in touch with Schumer's office on Capitol Hill.

"We won because we were right," Hohne said, "but also because we tried to operate as a responsible organization. I think we have the respect of the National Park Service because we never got rowdy or contentious. We had a public demonstration but we kept everything respectable and above board," he added.

One of the real benefits of the whole experience is the organization itself, Hohne reported. Out of 280 slip holders, 154 have paid dues to support BIMBA.

—By Ryck Lydecker

