

SHOWDOWN IN BIG SKY COUNTRY

When Bill and Kathy Frazier sold their house in Bozeman, Montana and cashed in their retirement funds to bankroll and refurbish a marina, they knew it wouldn't be easy. After all, the docks were awash and abandoned, the floating ship's store /office building was nearly sunk and slipholders, well, there weren't any.

The federal Bureau of Reclamation had in fact condemned the Yacht Basin Marina, a 40-year-old facility on leased land at the north end of 25-mile-long Canyon Ferry Reservoir, about 20 miles east of Helena, the state capital.

But after 20 years in Big Sky country, the two transplanted Easterners and BoatU.S. members had developed the kind of resourcefulness that the great American West is famous for. Heck, even the devastating Canyon Ferry Fire — which turned 44,000 acres and 13 homes to toast last July and came within 100 feet of destroying six years of blood and sweat at the marina — only slowed them down some.

A VHF radio base station the Coast Guard Auxiliary had installed at the marina the year before was manned 24 hours a day and provided a critical link in fire fighting operations. At one point, the only evacuation route for local residents was the

lake itself, and the marina became a nerve center where helicopters “dipped” out of the basin and tank trucks used the launch ramp to take on water.

But even that experience didn't prepare the Fraziers for the firebomb their landlord, Uncle Sam, dropped last October. Under a new government “plan,” they would have to close their marina in three years. You might say they went from the fire into the frying pan.

“We didn't know anything about this until two weeks before public hearings were to be held,” reports Kathy Frazier. “Everyone knew the Bureau of Reclamation had been working on a management plan for Canyon Ferry for years but nobody knew they were proposing to shut down our marina.”

As called for by federal law, the management plan and environmental assessment addressed all the activities and water uses on and around Canyon Ferry, created 50 years ago by damming the Missouri River. The plan laid out three different management schemes, two of which — including the agency's “preferred alternative” — called for closing Yacht Basin Marina when the Frazier's contract runs out in 2004.

Why?

Overcrowding. The aim was to “displace” recreational vessels from the reservoir's north end to “reduce congestion and the feeling of overcrowding experienced by some users.” And to do that, the plan called for spending \$500,000 to dredge a new harbor about 15 miles down the lake.

“We've been boating on Canyon Ferry for the last eight years,” reports Sam Gianfrancisco, who keeps his 20-foot Bayliner at Yacht Basin. “When they say it's overcrowded, I don't know what they're talking about. This in Montana, for heaven's sake.”

But there was standing room only at the public meetings, thanks to Gianfrancisco and other boaters who formed the Canyon Ferry Action Committee to shine the public spotlight on what the Bureau was proposing.

'MOM & POP' AND PROUD OF IT

Yacht Basin is one of three private marinas operated under Bureau of Reclamation concessions contracts. And like Yacht Basin, Kim's Marina across the lake and Goose Bay Marina at the south end are “mom-and-pop” operations. Local boaters like it that way.



"Bill and Kathy Frazier brought the marina back from a state of disaster, with the blessing of the bureau every step of the way," says Gianfrancisco. "They put in a \$50,000 fuel dock with the bureau's approval last summer. Now they want to close it?"

Another feature of the plan called for turning all the concessions over to a single operator ultimately, and that didn't sit well with the boaters either.

"We feel Yacht Basin and the other marinas are well run by the current concessionaires," Gianfrancisco adds. "They've invested their lives in their businesses and we don't want to be at the mercy of a single concession operator, anyway."

Never mind that the 100-slip Yacht Basin offers the only deepwater dockage on Canyon Ferry, despite wide fluctuations in the lake levels. That's why the Canyon Ferry Yacht Club and the True North Sailing Club make their home at the marina and about one-third of the boats in slips are sailboats. And with what Frazier says is the deepest, longest ramp on the lake, Yacht Basin is the preferred launch site for trailer sailers.

The fact that Yacht Basin Marina is the base of operations for the Coast Guard Auxiliary seemed to have been overlooked, too. The plan notes "about 30 water-related deaths" since 1975, but it fails to mention the hard work of Flotilla 10-03 to cut the accident and death rate since 1990. According to Flotilla Commander and BoatU.S. member Robert E. Carroll, there have been only four boating fatalities on the lake since then. (In fact, Flotilla 10-03 was judged the Auxiliary's top flotilla in 1998, and awarded the BoatU.S. Flotilla of the Year Award for its efforts.)

GRASS ROOTS GRASS FIRE

When word about closing Yacht Basin first got to Gianfrancisco, fellow boater Sal Lalani and a few other slipholders last October, it spread like, well, wildfire.

"A bunch of us happened to be out on the docks one Saturday when we got the news from Kathy (Frazier) that the bureau wanted the marina closed when their contract runs out in 2004," says Gianfrancisco, who lives in Bozeman, 90 miles away. "Well, I knew we had do something to get the word out to other boaters."

Adding urgency to anxiety, not only had the bureau scheduled public meetings

Government plans to close one marina on Canyon Ferry Reservoir because of "overcrowding" on the lake spurred local boaters to action.



Photo by Bill Frazier

Forest fires devastated areas near Yacht Basin Marina last summer.

with only two weeks notice, but the dates were Nov. 7 and 8, Election Day and the day after, a time when the attention of most people would not be on boating.

"I knew something about how government works, and I knew we had a good case for getting the meetings rescheduled," says Gianfrancisco, who was a county traffic engineer for 17 years. "The whole idea made no sense. If you've got an overcrowded intersection, you find a way to handle the traffic. You don't close the intersection."

The ad hoc grass roots team started alerting other boaters, cabin owners, elected officials and the media. Then they got the editorial ear of the *Helena Independent Record*, which professed in print to be "mystified" by the proposal to close Yacht Basin while building another marina farther away. The paper also criticized the plan for lack of hard numbers to back up the overcrowding rationale.

Within days, the bureau's in-box in Billings overflowed with letters opposing the plan. Public reaction was so strong that the bureau had no choice but to delay the public meetings until mid-January. That gave the boaters time to review the plan, develop positions on the issues and lay out a strategy to get their points across.

"At first we'd meet at the marina restaurant to discuss our plans and everybody just threw in a few dollars to buy stamps and make copies," says Gianfrancisco.

Yvonne Johnson, who runs the restaurant, took notes and held onto the money, but by the third meeting the group had for-

mally coalesced into the Canyon Ferry Action Committee, complete with check book, post office box and Web site. Lalani was elected chairman and Gianfrancisco vice chairman and spokesman for the group.

The next task was to get the word out on the committee's positions, publicize the new meeting dates and turn out a crowd. That's where the Web site proved particularly effective, Gianfrancisco says. The committee also ran paid ads in local newspapers, wrote letters and generated extensive media coverage for their positions.

"When it came time for the hearings, we overwhelmed them again," reports Gianfrancisco. "Over 700 people showed up at the Helena meeting; one boater even drove in from Billings, 300 miles away."

20/20 HINDSIGHT

According to Kim McCartney of the bureau's Montana Area Office in Billings and "team leader" for the plan, the public meetings sent the bureau back to the drawing board, but he maintains it's all part of the process.

"People have complained that there was no public input until the draft came out," McCartney says. "Well, there was nothing to comment on before October."

He explained that "scoping" meetings were held in July 1999 in an attempt to "bridge a 1993 study to the issues of today."

"But there were no proposals for management actions, nothing specific on the table then," McCartney says. "We expect to have a revised plan finished by the end of April and after we get it printed there will be a new 60-day comment period."

McCartney said the original idea to relocate boating use to the southern end of the lake came about because some people had complained of "overcrowding" and "user conflicts" on the water in campground visitor surveys.

"Hindsight is always 20/20 and obviously the public didn't like that idea," McCartney reports. "So basically, we've already agreed to reissue a concession contract for the Yacht Basin Marina site when the current contract expires in 2004."

While that won't be official until the revised plan is approved this summer, at least the bureau is on record to keep the marina there and the news is a great relief to local boaters. So even as Yacht Basin Marina played a critical role during last year's forest fires, local boaters managed to build a fire break against smoldering red tape that looks like it's finally burned out. ■

— By Ryck Lydecker