

Posted on Sun, Nov. 06, 2005

MARINE INDUSTRY

No room at the marina

There isn't enough space for all of Florida's registered boats, and some cities are starting to take action

BY AMY MARTINEZ

aemartinez@herald.com

Manuel Huerta always envied people with bigger boats, until he went shopping for one himself.

But it wasn't the \$700,000-and-up price tag of the 60-foot Bertram sportfishing boat he wanted that changed his mind -- it was the cost of a place to park it: \$650,000 at Cocoplum Yacht Club.

"For a slab of concrete and four pilings that you tie your boat?" Huerta recalls asking. "That's astronomical."

Boat slips are in high demand and short supply as developers planning waterfront condominiums pay marina owners top dollar for their land. Environmental regulations make building slips difficult. And Mother Nature hasn't helped by sending eight hurricanes Florida's way over the past two years, destroying hundreds of slips.

Complicating matters are more people like Huerta, who want the kind of boats that can't just be parked in a driveway and trailed behind an SUV.

Boat dealers say they worry that sales will slow without more places for people to put their purchases -- though that hasn't happened yet. Broward and Miami-Dade counties have taken on more than 8,000 new boats since 2000.

Bob Everhard, who owns Florida Yachts and Charters in Miami Beach with his wife, Susan, said he took the unusual step last month of including a slip with the sale of a 49-foot sailboat to a local architect. Everhard normally uses the slip at the Miami Beach Marina for showcasing boats he hopes to sell, but the architect couldn't find a spot elsewhere. And Everhard didn't want to miss out on the \$455,000 sale.

"Five years ago, this would have never even been discussed," Everhard said. "We're at a point where it could start affecting sales, without a doubt."

Waterfront access also has become a top concern for groups representing boat manufacturers and owners. Scott Croft, spokesman for the Arlington, Va.-based Boat Owners Association of the United States, said South Florida is ground zero in the battle for more access. For one, he said, it's a boating hot spot. And for another, residential developers are buying marinas and doing away with them or converting them to private use.

"Can you blame the marina owner for trying to get the best price for his sweat and equity? I can't," Croft said. "A developer coming in with a big checkbook looks very attractive."

Advocates for more slips said they lack data proving that South Florida is losing marinas in today's sizzling real estate market. Marinas are mostly mom-and-pop operations, making them tough to track. But they are able to point to data statewide showing that at the very least, the number of new slips lags the number of new boats.

Thomas Tyghem said he's been approached countless times by developers of waterfront condominiums hoping to buy his property.

"They come in and offer me money I could do well with," said Tyghem, who owns six marinas from Stuart to Miami that he hopes to pass on to his children someday.

"I won't do it, though," Tyghem said. "There's a need for us and a want for us."

Ray Graziotto, president of Jupiter-based Seven Kings Holdings, which owns and manages marinas, said residential developers have made it more difficult for companies like his to acquire new properties. Today's prices for waterfront land are based on the likely profits from a luxury condo, not the more modest take of a marina, he said.

Melanie Neale, who pays \$400 a month for a slip at Marina Grande in North Miami Beach, said she fears that she's being priced out of South Florida waters.

For three years, Neale has lived aboard a sailboat at the marina while pursuing a master's degree in creative writing at Florida International University.

But she expects to be somewhere else this time next year, when the marina's new owner, Boca Developers, is likely to begin selling slips for \$400,000. Neale, 26, figures she'll set sail for the Gulf Coast, where she hopes slips are still somewhat affordable.

"The only other option is to sell my boat, and I really don't want to do that," said Neale, who stayed with her boat during Hurricane Wilma; both survived without any damage.

Some argue that government help is needed. Here are a few examples of what local officials are doing:

- In Martin County, officials are considering a "no net loss" policy, which would require developers to replace any commercial waterfront property converted to private use.
- In Palm Beach County, voters approved a \$50 million bond issue last year to buy the development rights to marinas and boat ramps.
- In Broward County, the Florida Inland Navigation District is studying the possibility of dredging the Dania Cutoff to allow for a new, 600-slip marina.
- In Miami, the city plans to build a 255-boat mooring field off Dinner Key in Coconut Grove. The city is also allowing Flagship Properties to build a 50-slip marina on Watson Island, though it's not likely to help people like Neale. The plans are for a marina catering to mega-yachts.

Huerta, a mortgage banker, said he'll stick with his 48-foot Viking sportfishing boat, which he keeps tied up at the Dinner Key Marina in Coconut Grove for \$650 a month. The marina told him it had no available slips for a 60-footer, so he inquired elsewhere and got the same response.

That's how he found himself at the Cocoplum Yacht Club, one of a growing number of "dockominiums," so named because they sell wet slips just like condominiums. "My fear is that if I do get a bigger boat, I won't have a place to put it," Huerta, 45, said.

The growth in dockominiums concerns Tom Errath, a vice president for Brunswick Boat in Lake Forest, Ill., whose job is to focus on increasing waterfront access. He said dockominiums may be fine for experienced boaters with a lot of money, but not for novices, and certainly not for anyone without a lot of money.

"A new boater probably would prefer to rent a slip and see how it goes," Errath said. "If they have to buy a slip, maybe they'll say, 'Well, instead I'll buy a condo in Colorado.'"

But dockominiums could be just the beginning. A market for dry storage racks also has emerged. Dania Beach Boat Club, one of two new "rackominiums" in South Florida, sells dry slips for up to \$300,000. Realtor Ray Kooser said he sold 50 of 210 slips within the first month.

"We have people come in and say to us, 'We're thinking of buying a boat, but we don't know where to keep it,'" Kooser said. "This gives them assurances."

