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Region's First CT Clean Marina - Three Belles Marina Earns DEP Certification:
Clean Environment Makes Good Business Sense - Three Belles Marina Raises the Bar
By Suzanne Thompson

Three Belles Marina in Niantic has become the first marina in the region, and only the eleventh in the state, to earn the Connecticut Department of Protection (DEP) "Connecticut Clean Marina" designation.

The certification, a voluntary environmental compliance program started by the state, with help from the state's marine trade industry and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) seed money about ten years ago, acknowledges efforts of marina facilities that prove they are going above and beyond required environmental regulations and participating in voluntary measures to keep the state's waters clean.

Marina owners Tobey and Libby Russ were awarded a plaque and watched last week as the Clean Marina flag was hoisted over the marina's main building, where it proudly flies below the American and Connecticut flags and next to the marina's symbol flags. CT DEP Deputy Commissioner Amey Marella, DEP and EPA program staff, local politicians, boating and environmental organization members joined in the celebration.

Three Belles Marina is a family-owned full service marina, providing wet slips, inside and outside valet racks, moorings, dryland trailer boats and winter storage services. The six-acre facility, tucked in Smith's Cove, has 150 fixed and floating seasonal slips and a 28-vessel mooring field.

Russ had never owned a marina before, but it was always something he wanted to do. He came out of the capital markets in New York. When the marina, started in the 1940s and owned by the Bayreuther family came up for sale, he bit. The Russ family moved up from Westport, and named the place Three Belles, after their three daughters, Margot, now 18, and twins, Jessica and Abigail, now 15.

"We've really worked at bringing the facility back to its glory," he said, adding that the plan was very much to create a family-oriented marina. Taking care of the environment and protecting quality of the marina waters is a big part of that.

The main building is undergoing a complete make-over, with new roof, added deli and ice cream station and expanded store space. There's a new valet rack storage building and outdoor valet racks. The swimming pool got a complete make-over and relandscaping. Greenbelts have been added and a colorful perennial bed tastefully disguises fuel tanks.

Russ admitted he didn't know what he was getting into when it came to environmental compliance. But he quickly found out after joining the Connecticut Marine Trades Association (CMTA).

"The first thing I heard about was all of these requirements, permits and licenses I didn't know anything about," he admitted. He started to work with Grant Westerson, the CMTA executive director and staff, and Rick Huntley, CT DEP Clean Marina Coordinator.

There literally are eight three-ring binders of information, Russ said, that spell out Clean Marina compliance. There are seven categories: mechanical activities, painting and fiberglass repair, hauling and storing boats, fueling, facility management, emergency planning and boater education. Every applicable state regulation, from recycling of white office paper, required of all Connecticut businesses, to "Fido stations" for pet waste, is considered.

"I liked it because it really allowed me to have a roadmap to bring the marina not only up to the required standard, but to go beyond that and to hold ourselves out as one of the very few marinas in the state and the only one in Niantic that has achieved this," he said.

It's not any one big item, he said, but a lot of smaller steps that add up. It's more about changing people's behaviors than making physical upgrades around the place.

"One of the biggest challenges is in getting people to do things differently," he said. That means customers have to change their ways around the marina. That includes the fish cleaning station, where fish racks must be put in plastic and go into the dumpster, not back into the cove. There are recycling containers and a new organized bin system by the rack building.

"You can never be successful with this kind of program without support of your customers," he said.

Russ and Huntley agree that one of the biggest behavioral changes, and one with significant environmental impact, has been the handling of the anti-foulant paint on saltwater boat bottoms.

The paint contains a high concentration of copper, a registered pesticide, that deters marine life from growing on it. The paint purposely sloughs off to prevent marine life growth on the boat.

It's been common practice for people to scrub and power wash the bottom of their boats to keep them clean and remove any marine life, as well as sand and repaint them in dry storage. The bad news is that the metal ends up in the bay, where it threatens other marine life.

While the DEP and boating industry figure out regulations that will largely stop these practices, Russ said Three Rivers has already taken steps to stop the bottom scrubbing in the water and committed to install its concrete waste water trapping system this fall.

The marina also requires its boat owners to use proper dustless sanding and tarp systems on dry land to recapture the material or offers to do the service for them.

Huntley pointed out how the high percentage of pervious gravel surface around the marina, instead of asphalt, creates filtering and minimizes direct surface water runoff into the Sound.

The marina's parking lot and winter boat storage area, a graveled surface, serves as a giant filtration system. Russ credits Lee Deer, yard manager, with maintaining the health of the parking lot and the grounds.

Three Belles also hired Billy Martin, general manger, Gary Julian, customer service and Gail Moncovich, office administration.

In issuing the certification, CT DEP pointed out that the marina staff recycles bottles and cans, keeps trash containers covered and tied down and provides for proper disposal of pet waste. Marina staff is trained in spill response and has access to a spill response kit in case of an emergency.

"You are definitely are a leader," Marrella told Russ as she explained what it takes for a facility to get certified. "This is not an easy process; you don't just say you're going to do this and the next day you're in. It's a commitment."

Russ estimates that he has spent over \$200,000 on environmentally-relate improvements. This includes an upgraded septic system, not considered as part of the Clean Marina initiative, he said, but a very critical part of water quality.

"One of the biggest contributors to water pollution in the Long Island Sound is non-performing septic systems," he said.

Russ is not shy about letting customers see, or feel, the added value. The marina established a \$1.75 per foot boat fee per season to support investments it has and will make to achieve and exceed the environmental performance standards.

"While our customers didn't come up and cheer about the fee, I've not had one single complaint about it," he said. "I think that says a lot about the value of what we're doing."

At that minimal fee, though, he said it will be a long time before the Marina recaptures what it has spent on environmentally-related improvements.

"It's really great to see a business in town underline our efforts and our advocacy," Fred Grimsey, Save-the-Rivers/Save-the-Hills founder, said at the ceremony. "It's great that

people in business to make money recognize the economic value of clean water. For years, there's been that argument 'We can't afford that environmental regulation or advocacy.' Gradually, it's been proven. This is not only good for the environment, but it's good business. I cheer that."

"To become a Clean Marina and be able to fly that flag, you've got to bust your fanny," Westerson said. "You've got to spend some money. It takes a lot of broad-based work to get to where this marina is. Tobey has worked very hard in two years and earned every inch of it."

Coming into an older marina requires modernizing, bringing things up to code and perhaps catching up with some paperwork, he said.

"It will draw customers, not because you're flying that (CT DEP flag), but because the place is clean, sharp, everything is maintained. People are going to notice that the marina looks nice," Westerson added.

"Marinas have become more than just a place to park your boat," said Paul Formica, East Lyme First Selectman. "The people who both use and manage this lovely area are stewards of the environment. These marinas are economic stimulators for our community. They play such an important role in the success of all that we do and are becoming here in the town of East Lyme."

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) cites nonpoint source pollution as a leading cause of water quality problems throughout the United States. Nonpoint sources of pollution occur when water runs over land, picks up pollutants and deposits them in surface waters, such as the bay or tributaries leading into it.

The other ten marinas that have already achieved Clean Marina status include Saybrook Point Inn, Marina and Spa in Old Saybrook, Harry's Marine Repair in Westbrook, Shennecossett Yacht Club in Groton, Dodson Boatyard in Stonington, , Guilford Town Marina, Gwenmor Marina in Mystic, Noank Village Boatyard Connors & O'Brien Marina in Pawcatuck and Mystic Shipyard West.

Of the approximately 300 marinas CT DEP counts in the state, another 30, including a handful in New London County, have taken the pledge to seek Clean Marina status within one year. These include Port Niantic Marina, Reynolds Garden and Marine in Lyme, Pine Island Marine in Groton, Brewer Yacht Yard, Fort Rachel Marine Services and Mystic Shipyard East in Mystic, Norwest Marine of Pawcatuck, Crocker's Boatyard in New London, and Don's Dock in Stonington. A handful of marinas on the Connecticut River and the shoreline in Middlesex County also have taken the pledge.

See www.threebellesmarina.com. For more information about Connecticut's Clean Marina Program, contact Rick Huntley at 860-424-3609 or rick.Huntley@ct.gov.

