

CITY MARINA WINS GOLD MEDAL OF INTERNATIONAL MARINA DESIGNS

BY ROB PRESTON

In February 2009, City Marina of Charleston, S.C., MDA's 2005 Marina of the Year winner, received notice that it had won PIANC's 2009 Jack Nichol Award for outstanding marina design. PIANC is a worldwide association of marina design professionals that offers expert advice to marinas around the world on cost-effective, reliable, and sustainable infrastructure designs.

This international award is named after the late Jack Nichol, a well-known marina designer. City Marina won thanks to a 10-year, \$12 million renovation that rebuilt the marina from the ground up. The resulting facility is one of the best marinas on the East Coast.

BACKGROUND

In 1989, Hurricane Hugo battered City Marina causing extensive damage and forcing the city to shut down a large part of the marina. "From 1989 to 1994 the city closed the marina to transient traffic, and it kind of just sat there," said Robbie Freeman, the managing partner of City Marina Co., a holding company that owns and operates marinas.

Faced with the prospect of spending millions of dollars to renovate and upgrade the marina, the city of Charleston decided to sell the marina in 1994 to City Marina Co. with the promise that the new owner would keep the marina as a viable business. Freeman agreed. "We felt that we had a prime location on the eastern seaboard, and our goal was to make it one of the best marinas in the world," he noted.

When City Marina Co. took over the municipally owned and operated City Marina, it had one goal in mind: to make the marina the primary boating destination on the southeastern coast of the United States. Over the next 10 years, the company would spend \$12 million to transform this vision into reality.

Thanks to the renovation, City Marina became a thriving marina once again with new slips, a new MegaDock fuel dock that could serve megayachts, a new electrical system, and a new floating bathroom facility to accommodate transient boaters.

TEARING DOWN THE WALL

The first step City Marina Co. took to implement its vision was to hire Applied Technology and Management (ATM), a marina engineering and consulting firm based out of Charleston, S.C.

City Marina Co. knew that it needed someone to help

design the renovations, get the needed permitting, and do some of the financial forecasting work needed for the project. It selected ATM because of its background in marina designs and its experience in renovation projects. "They [ATM] were involved in both the original design and the implementation all the way through. We couldn't have done it without them," said Freeman.

City Marina Co. and ATM developed a master plan for renovating the marina. It called for the renovation project to be done in phases, so the marina could remain open to boaters during the work. "We'd get each phase finalized and then move onto the next phase," said Freeman.

One of the first things the renovators did was remove a large concrete wall that the U.S. Navy had installed in 1960 when it used the marina for a naval base. The wall was built from the Ashley River bottom to about seven feet above the surface of the water to keep sediment out of the marina. Although the concrete wall reduced the amount of dredging that was needed at the marina, it also blocked the marina's view of the open water, thereby creating a boxed-in feeling that was not appealing to boaters. "So we removed the concrete

wall and allowed the natural currents to move in," said Sam Phlegar, ATM senior vice president. City Marina Co. decided to install its new slips in deeper water to avoid costly maintenance dredging.

NEW CONCRETE SLIPS

Having removed the concrete wall, City Marina Co. and ATM decided to replace all 350 wet slips at City Marina, many of which were in a state of disrepair from the hurricane. Again, this replacement project was done in phases so as not to keep boaters from using the marina.

Besides replacing the slips, City Marina Co. also made them larger to attract bigger boat owners to City Marina. "The marina had a lot of smaller slips, and we replaced them all with docks that were 40 feet or longer," said Freeman.

City Marina Co. decided to install concrete floating docks at the marina but used two different dock manufacturers. Some of the new concrete slips came from Walcon Marine in England because the exchange rate made these docks a bargain. "Later on in the replacement project, the pound [Sterling] got a



City Marina won the PIANC 2009 Jack Nichol Award thanks in part to its aesthetic beauty.



City Marina also got the PIANC 2009 Jack Nichol Award thanks to its functionality. The marina's MegaDock fuel dock offers high-speed fueling for megayachts.

lot stronger, and the U.K. manufacturer wasn't able to compete with the lower priced American dock manufacturers," said Freeman. So City Marina bought the remaining slips from ShoreMaster in Fergus Falls, Minn.

To complement its new slips, City Marina also installed a new electrical system to provide more power to its customers. The new electrical system offered boaters 240 volts of power compared to the 208 volts that most marinas provided. Although this cost more, City Marina Co. made this decision to attract transient boaters during the peak boating season, which is when the transient boaters want that extra power. "The main thing is to have plenty of power because if you get 150 boats at the marina that are running their air-conditioned units during the summer, it takes a lot of electricity," said Freeman.

City Marina also added mobile transformers so it could offer its larger customers different voltages on an as-needed basis. Even though the new slips and the improved electrical system were huge additions to City Marina, the most impressive part of the renovation, the MegaDock, was still to come.

THE MEGADOCK

In 2003, City Marina began working on the most significant part of the entire renovation, the one thing that would set it apart from every other marina—the MegaDock. "It's big. It's 20 feet wide, 1,530 feet long, and is the longest freestanding floating dock in the southeastern United States," said Freeman.

City Marina Co. had heard megayacht captains complain that they would never visit the marina because of its inadequate fueling system. The megayacht owners and captains complained that they were spending inordinate amounts of time waiting to get fuel.

The MegaDock was the definitive answer to these complaints. It's a huge fueling dock with six high-speed diesel pumps that can pump at a rate of 60 gallons per minute and two slower speed pumps that can pump up to 40 gallons per minute. City Marina Co. believed this unique fueling dock would attract the megayachts that most other marinas in the area couldn't service. "The MegaDock is dedicated to transient boaters. So when boats come in to get fuel, they don't have to wait in line at the fuel dock," said Freeman. The MegaDock was built out of concrete by Bellingham Marine and took about two years to complete. It cost \$3 million to build the

dock, which was far more expensive than any other fueling dock in the area. On the other hand, City Marina got a \$1.2 million grant from the Boating Infrastructure Grant Program to help build the new gas dock, which opened in 2005 and has been hugely successful in attracting megayachts up to 250 feet long to the marina.

PIANC REQUIREMENTS

The PIANC Jack Nichol Design Award is open to all marinas that provide slips to recreational boaters. The marina must have been built within the last 25 years, been successfully operating for at least the last five, and be open to the boating public.

Having met these requirements, City Marina submitted an application to the PIANC committee, which then judged City Marina on its design functionality and aesthetics. In presenting the award to City Marina, the international judges said that the marina's design is a great mixture of form and functionality. They also praised the marina's owners and ATM for their perseverance and commitment in completing a project that looked like it was going to die yesterday.

THE FUTURE

Freeman said the award recognition makes all the hard work, all the time and money spent in renovating the marina worth it. "It's a thrill and an honor for us to be recognized on an international level," said Freeman.

Looking back on the 10-year, \$12 million renovation project, Freeman said his only regret is that he didn't finish the project sooner. However, he noted that the marina was able to stay open and remain profitable throughout the project. "Today we bring in \$15 million in gross sales," said Freeman.

Now that City Marina is a top-of-the-line marina, has been recognized as MDA's Marina of the Year winner, and certified as a Clean Marina, what's next? Within the next couple of years, Freeman hopes that City Marina gets even more international megayacht business once word has spread about it winning the PIANC 2009 Jack Nichol Award.

City Marina is now a "must stop" for transient boaters along the eastern seaboard, not only because it offers easy access to historic Charleston, said Nick McGinty, the general manager for City Marina Co., but also because it won an international design award. ⚓