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[Current Issue](#)

[Sample Issue](#)

[Links](#)

[Buyer's Guide](#)

[Supplier Info](#)

[Marina of  
the Year](#)

[Books](#)

[Adv. Info](#)

[Feedback](#)

[About Us](#)



## Charleston City Marina transforms itself into our 2005 "Marina of the Year"

By Adolfo Mendez

It was a mere 15 years ago that the City Marina of Charleston (South Carolina) was in dire straits, to the point of going out of business. Hurricane Hugo had ravaged the marina in 1989, leaving the docks in terrible shape and prompting city officials to wonder if there was a future for the facility.

Since that time, South Carolina's Charleston City Marina has undergone some major changes. Beginning with the privatization of the marina in the mid-1990s and extending to the 2003 construction of the longest single dock in the U.S., Charleston City Marina has been transformed into a modern, state-of-the-art marina that can meet the needs of megayachts, as well as small sailboats.



Located in the heart of historic downtown Charleston, S.C., Charleston City Marina has repeatedly demonstrated that it will stop at nothing to meet the demands and expectations of its customers. Because the marina is heavily focused on its customers, it doesn't do only one thing well; it excels at many things.

Through a series of astute capital investments and installation of a strong management team, the marina is now one of the busiest marinas on the East Coast, and certainly one of the busiest transient marinas on the eastern seaboard. For this and for reasons that will become apparent throughout this article, Marina Dock Age has selected Charleston City Marina as its 2005 "Marina of the Year."

### Facilities improvements

First opened in 1960, the municipal marina had no major problems until Hurricane Hugo struck in 1989. Following the devastation of this hurricane, city officials wondered whether they should spend money upgrading the facility or simply privatize it. It decided on the latter course of action, and in 1994, Charleston City Company, a subsidiary of The Beach Company, which has a 50-year lease on the property from the local government, took over. The private firm promised city officials that it would rebuild and upgrade the marina, making it a bigger and better facility that will truly be a business the city can be proud to call its own.

The Beach Company financed several renovations of the marina and the management team at the marina is credited with the impressive transformation of the facility. Heading that team is Managing Partner Robbie Freeman, a Certified Marina Manager, and General Manager Nick McGinty.

"Robbie had a vision for the whole place," recalls long-time Harbormaster David Rogers. It was that vision that motivated the capital investments made at the City Marina (as it is known locally), guided the hiring of staff, and propelled the marina to become a first-class operation. For his part, Rogers keeps up with industry trends to make sure the marina is always ahead of its competitors. "My biggest concern has been to make sure that the customer gets what he needs and that I'm being as helpful as possible."

Rogers credits his upbringing for his strong desire to help ensure that the City Marina provides unmatched service. "It's always been a priority of mine to offer the best. It goes back to my dad ... having a good father instills certain beliefs and values in me."

Such internal fortitude helps explain the drive behind the key managers responsible for the dramatic changes at the marina. And that's not overstating it. Consider: Twelve years ago, the docks were in disrepair, obsolete, and a liability thanks to Hurricane Hugo. At the time, Freeman not only found a decaying facility, but also one with an extremely inefficient layout. Although the marina's annual occupancy approached 90% in the early 1990s, this was due more to low dockage fees rather than to an attractive facility. Moreover, transient business at the marina was virtually nonexistent.



The new management team immediately set to work to redevelop the marina. It removed parts of the old concrete breakwater to allow for better current flow to remove

silt and increase dock space. The marina installed a Walcon floating dock system and replaced the old fuel system, providing easier access for the boats. As the marina made upgrades, it saw a significant increase in the number of transient boaters that visited the facility. Quite naturally, these visitors suggested other improvements to keep existing transient boaters and attract new ones. The marina's management team took these suggestions quite seriously and implemented many of them.

So what's changed at the City Marina after several major renovations totaling more than \$10 million? For one, annual revenues have grown to more than \$7 million per year from \$178,000 in 1994. "We're actually on track to have close to \$10 million in revenues this year," Freeman told an industry wide breakfast at the International Marina and Boatyard Conference in Orlando, Fla.

The marina has grown to 350 slips with more than 10,000 feet of linear dock space spread out over more than 40 acres of water from 102 slips and 4,000 feet of linear space in 1994. Whereas the marina primarily did business with local powerboaters and sailboaters in 1994, it now caters to all boaters: both power and

sail; annuals and transient; vessels up to 250 feet in length.

## The MegaDock

Looking at Charleston City Marina today, the one feature of the marina that stands out is the MegaDock, which was completed in 2003. The MegaDock is a 20-ft. wide, 1,530-ft. long floating fuel dock that offers 3,000 feet of dockage.



When it thought about building the MegaDock, marina management saw it filling two holes in the marina's operation. First and foremost, the MegaDock would offer premier dockage with convenient fueling to transient vessels visiting the area. Second, and almost as important, the City Marina built the MegaDock to be a wave attenuator and reduce the exposure of interior slips. The marina says the MegaDock has been successful in both areas.

The MegaDock, which serves transient boaters moving up and down the East Coast, was the centerpiece of a redevelopment project that added 56 new slips and produced 5,300 feet of new dockage for megayachts and other transient boaters. Of the 56 new slips added along with the MegaDock, 15 were designed for 60-ft. vessels, 29 for 50-footers, and 12 for 40-footers.

At the heart of the MegaDock is an upgraded fuel system that includes a second 12,000-gallon diesel tank, all new fuel lines and pumps, and six new state-of-the-art dispensers. When megayacht captains brought their vessels to Charleston, they told marina management that the marina needed a bigger space to dock their yachts, a speedier fueling system, and higher grade diesel. The MegaDock accomplished all these goals. The marina went from five pumps and 5,700 gallons per hour to 11 pumps and 27,000 gallons per hour. It is the only certified ValvTect Marina in the Charleston area, offering the highest quality fuel.

The MegaDock attracts between 40 and 70 boats each day during the transient boating season. The entire dock consists of side tie-ups with access to fuel from any location on the MegaDock. This makes docking and fueling convenient and fast for a weary captain.

Other transient amenities include high-speed wireless Internet, cable TV, water, and 30, 50, and 100 amp single phase, and 208 or 480 volt three phase power. Furthermore, the MegaDock offers complimentary mobile and fixed pump outs.

## Special challenges

Although the MegaDock is the crown jewel of Charleston City Marina, getting it built was not an easy task.

To fund the MegaDock, the marina applied for grant money from the Boating Infrastructure Grant (BIG) Program, a federal grant program designed to improve transient dockage for recreational boats. The grant program is administered by the Washington, D.C.-based U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, but the MegaDock was the largest single project ever submitted for BIG funding.

Prior to building the MegaDock, the Charleston City Marina had already received three of these grants, so it was hopeful of receiving another one.

The federal government agency reviewed the project and awarded the marina a \$1.2 million grant for the MegaDock, which the marina matched with a \$1.2 million investment. However, the Fish & Wildlife Service's contract stipulated that all program income resulting from the MegaDock had to be put back into the facility

for the next 20 years. This denied the marina any return on its \$1.2 million investment.

Given this requirement, the marina's managers declined the funds, but stayed in contact with the Fish & Wildlife Service in Washington, D.C. to see if a compromise agreement could be reached.

After a year and a half of protracted discussions, the Fish & Wildlife Service ended up rewriting the contract to exclude language that restricted "program income." This was not only a great achievement for the Charleston City Marina, but it also paved the way for all future award winners.

With the opening of the MegaDock, the U.S. Coast Guard noticed that more and more 175-ft. and longer vessels were lined up nightly at the dock for refueling, and began reviewing the MegaDock's fueling operation. The Coast Guard found that the marina was not licensed to fuel vessels with more than a 10,500-gallon capacity. Any facilities pumping this amount of fuel had to be MTSA 105 or 154 Certified by the Coast Guard (in accordance with the Maritime Transportation Security Act).

Through research, the Charleston City Marina discovered that a handful of marinas in South Florida had been recently 105 certified. The managers believed that if the Florida marinas were certified, the City Marina could be certified, too.

The marina hired the South Florida consulting firm, Envirocare, to help with the certification process. The marina and Envirocare went back and forth with the Coast Guard for four months regarding necessary security measures. These measures included writing a facility spill plan that would be similar to that of a commercial port. This plan required the marina to have all necessary spill response kits on-site, along with a certified spill response team that was able to respond to any emergency within 30 minutes.

The Coast Guard was reluctant to grant MTSA certification to Charleston City Marina because it would set a precedent—this would be the first marina outside of Florida to be certified. After four rounds of negotiations, the Coast Guard finally approved Charleston City Marina as a 105 & 154 Certified Marina. The marina was able to resume fueling vessels holding more than 10,500 gallons and docking SOLAS vessels.

Charleston City Marina's managers knew that its megayacht captains wanted fast fuel services, so getting this certification was a critical step in the marina's ability to serve these customers, Rogers noted, and critical for the marina's continued growth.

### **Attracting customers**

Also critical to a marina's growth is the extent to which it is willing to make the boating lifestyle attractive. Charleston City Marina accomplishes this in several different ways.

Each year, Charleston City Marina hosts several fishing tournaments. For the past three years, the marina has hosted the HMY-Viking MegaDock Billfishing Tournament, the fifth and final leg of the South Carolina Governor's Cup Billfishing Series. This fishing tournament draws about 700 people to the marina for four nights of food, entertainment, and fun, all centered at the MegaDock.

For sailboaters, the marina hosts the Charleston Ocean Racing Association's (CORA) Race Week each spring. This four-day sailboat race draws about 1,000 people a day.



The marina also hosts the Charleston In-water Boat Show. More than 6,000 spectators came to the marina and participated in the 2005 In-water boat show.

For marina slipholders, the staff works with boat manufacturers to host 13 "rendezvous" weekends.

On August 13, 2005, Charleston City Marina hosted its first annual National

Marina Day Boat Show. Boat brokers housed on the marina complex were given the opportunity to showcase their boats for sale to the public, while also showcasing the marina's activities as stewards of the environment and the gateway to boating.

Making the boating lifestyle attractive also involves convincing boaters of its commitment to the environment. Charleston City Marina is one of the first marinas in South Carolina to receive the "Clean Marina" designation. To protect the environment, the marina takes several precautions when fueling vessels. For example, the marina has 1,000 feet of absorbent boom and 600 feet of containment boom on hand, and it provides all vessels with absorbent pads while fueling.

The marina also has two pumpout boats and two fixed pumpout stations to keep up with the required demand. The marina's "Fire Cart" is a state-of-the-art fire truck compressed onto a golf cart so it can reach all areas of the dock. There are also several water pumps in case of an emergency and two hand truck style fire carts.

### **Advertising and marketing**

According to K.C. Rennie, the special events and marketing manager at Charleston City Marina, the marina focuses marketing on two core groups: transient vessels and existing slipholders.

For transients, the marina relies on the MegaDock, the bathhouse, the dock office, offering high-speed fuel, as indirect marketing. But it also has two direct mail campaigns that coincide with the two major transient seasons. This mailer reaches about 5,000 transient boaters that will be moving south to north in the spring, and north to south in the fall, Rennie said.

The Web site ([www.charlestoncitymarina.com](http://www.charlestoncitymarina.com)) also serves as an up-to-date marketing tool, listing all the information a traveling yacht needs to know about the marina, including directions, tides, weather, amenities, photos, press releases, and marina event listings. Foreign-flagged vessels can also register their notice of arrival directly with the Coast Guard through the Web site. Most importantly, captains can make dock reservations through the Web site, with the marina receiving online reservations daily.

The Charleston City Marina also places full-color ads in guides for the Atlantic Coast and hands a "Transient Tote Bag" with a big marina logo to visitors. The bag contains a floating keychain, a pen and postits, and map of local entertainment.

For annual slipholders, the marina offers amenities and service excellence to retain boaters.

The City Marina also has a working relationship with boat brokers throughout Charleston and partners with some of them to offer free slip programs for new boat owners. Brokers utilize this option to close sales; the marina utilizes it as an introduction to the facility.

## Customer satisfaction

To give its customers a world-class boating experience, the marina hires a "very professional and proficient dock staff with strong customer service skills." It employs about 50 people during the boating season, many of whom have worked at the marina for 10 years.

The 15-25 dockhands are "real experts" in guiding vessels to their destinations. The communications office offers incoming boaters docking instructions via VHF radio, but the dockhands do the "hands-on" work. Two dock hands, trained to assist with mooring, greet each vessel.

Guests leave their boats and check-in at the City Marina's new office, which was completed in April 2005 and is located on the docks. The check-in process features three computer terminals for easy check-in, a seating area, and plenty of visitor information.

Guests can also freshen up in the City Marina's floating bathhouse. Located at the head of the MegaDock, this \$750,000 facility has eight private shower rooms. Each room includes a large shower and changing area, a Corian solid surface countertop and sink, tile floors, a mirror, and plenty of space to hang clothes.

One of the major ways the City Marina measures customer satisfaction is through comment cards. Each transient guest receives a comment card with paid postage in his or her transient bag. The marina gets several returns a day, and uses the information to make improvements and measure trends. This certainly allows the facility to stay one step ahead of any issues that may arise.

Every six-months, marina management sends comment cards to its long-term slipholders. These cards measure their overall satisfaction. To insure a good response, the marina enters all customers who return their surveys into a drawing for a \$50 gas card. It receives an 80% rate of return.

## Benefit to the community

As a member of the Charleston business community, The City Marina believes that it must be a "good corporate citizen." Toward this goal, it donates both time and talents to help the citizens of Charleston.



Over the last year, the marina has donated thousands of dollars to local charities, such as Water Missions International to help victims of Hurricane Katrina; Dragon Boat Charleston, a cancer survivors program; the Coastal Carolina Council of the Boy Scouts of America; the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation; the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society; the Isle of Palms Connector Run for the prevention of child abuse; Camp Happy Days for the developmentally disabled; the Special Olympics; the Fraternal Order of Police, Big Brothers & Sisters, Charleston Soil & Water Conservation, Semper Fidelis, and Carolina's Children, an organization based around the special interests of children in South Carolina.

## The future

The Charleston City Marina is always looking at new and innovative ways to serve its marina clients. Most recently, it purchased a nearby boatyard to accommodate the service and repair needs of its transient and permanent boaters. With the

diminishing supply of boatyards in South Carolina, the Charleston City Boatyard conveniently services vessels from South Carolina that historically traveled to North Carolina and Georgia for repairs.

"Our focus going forward will be to create a 'Class A' yacht service facility, an amenity that presently does not exist in our region," Freeman said.

As he approaches his 12th year at the marina, Freeman reflects: "It's very exciting to be part of such a forward-thinking company and a marina that, at the end of the day, wants to be the very best."

Marina Dock Age believes it is.