



Our marina crisis

What if your marina closed and you couldn't get to the cottage? For some boaters, it's not just a question, it's a looming reality

By Kate Barker

Reinhard Friedrich is uncharacteristically, if not completely, at rest. One leg bounces lightly under the table while he waits politely to get back to work. It's mid-June, and there's no end to what has to be done at his marina, the only one left on Anstruther Lake in Kawartha Highlands Signature Site Provincial Park. There used to be two marinas, but one was sold years ago to become The Landing, a 25-unit condominium complex. Right now, Reinhard is watching one of his guys try to secure heavy chains to a new dock anchor. The worker could probably figure it out, but Reinhard looks as though he'd rather do it himself. At 44, the marina co-owner sports a deep tan and muscular physique; with the help of his equally tireless wife, Donna, he operates a full-service marina for 250 cottages on the small boomerang-shaped lake, 160 of them water-access-only properties. The Friedrichs provide much more than just the basics of gas pumps, engine-repair service, parking, docking, and winter storage. They also run a well-stocked store, offer snowmobile service in winter, operate a barge, build docks, host the annual regatta and, now, will even serve you rotisserie chicken on Friday nights. The restaurant is empty on this Tuesday afternoon as the screen door bangs. Reinhard glances up.

"Okay," he says, smiling at a cottager holding up a bag of chips and a pop, the same man who, five minutes earlier, asked him to add \$54.66 in gas to the bill. Reinhard doesn't write any of this down. "I guess I ought to teach you how to run the till," he says. It's a friendly exchange that has played out for generations in small marinas across the province—a scene poised to be, within the near future, on a nostalgic par with a Norman Rockwell painting. Marinas as we know them may soon be extinct. And the cottagers who depend on them could be left high and dry.

It's all in the numbers

A significant portion of Ontario's marinas are for sale today, whether they're officially listed or not. And although when a marina is sold—as Al Donaldson, executive director of the Ontario Marine Operators Association (OMOA), points out—it often ends up in the hands of another marina operator, this is not always the case. The result: Marinas are closing, and new ones just aren't being built. Most of the 450 marinas the OMOA represents are family run. Even in a robust economy, the marina business is tough, but now, Donaldson says, "we are losing members because they can't even afford the \$495 fee."

Today, there are more reasons to sell a marina than to keep one—if you can find a buyer. Mary Jane and Jerry Tyndale listed Star Marine on Chemong Lake, near Bridgenorth, Ont., last June, but they aren't holding their breath for another marina operator to buy it. The Tyndales think it's possible for a young couple to do what they did 14 years ago, but they also think it's problematic. Their asking price is close to \$700,000, and banks aren't exactly lining up to finance marinas. In fact, most require a substantial down payment and guarantors. There were six marinas in the area when the Tyndales arrived in 1996; now two are for sale, one is only storing boats, and two more have closed down.

One complication is that many marinas have long operated as family businesses, and now the next generation may not be as interested in taking over as previous ones were. It doesn't help that the value of the waterfront land far exceeds the value of the businesses. The outcome is that the operators often sell. New owners, such as the Friedrichs, who bought Anstruther Lake Marina in 2003, must somehow try to make a profit while saddled with a large mortgage. Add to that the financial burden of rising property taxes, insurance rates, and water-lot leases; government regulations that strangle expansion; a chronic lack of trained mechanics and seasonal help; and long hours. Then there's the reaction of some cottagers when costs are passed along to them, in parking and slip charges. Donna Friedrich has seen it all. "I had one guy point a finger at me and yell, 'You're just gouging people!'" she says. "It was horrible." Not surprisingly, three years ago, after only four years in business, the Friedrichs were ready to call it quits. Fed up with the long hours and no reward, they put the marina on the market.

Much to the relief of the 160 water-access cottagers on Anstruther Lake, the Friedrich marina is no longer listed; they've been reprieved. But for the first time, those cottagers were forced to wonder how, in a marina-less world, they would cope. Without marinas, what are the 36,884 water-access-only property owners across Ontario to do?

Taking matters into their own hands

Cottager Jane Milligan owns one of those properties and may have part of the answer. Nine years ago, Nicholson's Marina on Gloucester Pool, near Orillia, went on the market after more than 50 years in operation. Access to Milligan's cottage was suddenly in doubt. Her first reaction was to contact the cottagers who use the marina. She invited them to a meeting, not really expecting anyone to come. The meeting drew a crowd. So Milligan formed a corporation—something she'd never done—and offered shares to cottagers. A cottager could secure a share by putting \$1,000 up front and further committing to loan the corporation another \$15,000 if the marina purchase went through. The marina's asking price was \$650,000. Milligan's corporation offered \$500,000—which meant that she had to sell more than 30 shares, or the deal was off. The property was on a whopping 319 acres, including an area with potential for rental, a feature that may have been the clincher for the more reluctant of the cottage owners. In the end, Milligan bought five shares herself (an outlay of \$80,000); the marina owner bought six; other cottagers, including children of the owner, bought 24.

Little Go Home Bay Dockers Corporation was born. Shareholders later agreed to lend another \$500 a year each to cover the cost of maintaining docks and buildings; that figure was increased to \$1,300 annually after six years. Today the corporation rents out a dozen additional slips to non-shareholders at a yearly rate of \$1,500 each. There's no mechanic, store, or gas, just parking, slips, and outdoor winter boat storage. A shareholders' agreement, drawn up by a lawyer, ensures access for all cottagers.

Water-access cottagers on other lakes have since turned to the Little Go Home Bay Dockers model to shape their agreements. But even if you are able to organize and come up with enough money to buy a marina as a group, what do you do when there is no option to purchase? This was the scenario facing water-access cottagers on Kashwakamak Lake, in North Frontenac Township, when the owners of Kings Cottages and Marina decided to close their doors and apply to have the property rezoned and divided for residential use, and then sell it off.

Road blocks

In 2006, Pam McCracken was among the 13 cottagers facing the prospect of losing access to her property once the marina closed down. Three years ago, she began the long and frustrating process of negotiating a Land Use Permit (LUP) from the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). Her group of 13 wanted to use an existing road that travels over a small piece of Crown land, put in a pipe dock with minimal environmental impact, and build a parking lot that would require only a small loss of trees. The problem? The four other cottagers who already used the road to access their properties objected to sharing. "They're throwing every possible obstruction in our way," McCracken says of the other cottagers. "We had to have Coast Guard approval. The Lake Association, the Conservation Authority, and now the Ministry of the Environment is involved. It's horrendous. We've got three inches of paperwork," she says. The cost of the LUP will be about \$850 a year; in addition, McCracken estimates that it will cost each cottager a minimum of \$2,000 to build the parking lot and finger docks, plus whatever road-maintenance fees are eventually negotiated with the four existing road-access cottagers. Early last fall, the MNR approved a 10-year LUP, but it's not a long-term solution; after the permit expires, the association will have to reapply.

Environmental assessments alone cost David Pattenden and a group of water-access cottagers on Big Gull Lake \$53,000 before they finally got the approval for an LUP after the two marinas at the large lake's remote east end closed down in 2008. The agreement the group proposed to the MNR seemed straightforward, allowing for the use of a thin slice of Crown land, 150 feet long by 15 feet wide, near the site of their former marina, which had been around for 60 years. The group also wanted to create parking beside an existing lot and install floating docks for 12 boats adjacent to where boats had been docked for the past six decades. The problem was the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, which allows objectors to stall the process without any monetary input on their part. In this case, there was a small number of objectors. According to Pattenden, one thought he saw a red-headed woodpecker. "So we had to do a red-headed woodpecker study," he says. "Six thousand bucks." Another objector possibly spotted a skink crossing the road. The result was a skink study and another \$7,000. Questions about aboriginal artifacts triggered an \$8,000 archaeological study. Even after fulfilling all of the requirements of a mandatory MNR Environmental Study Report, the group had to answer again to the same objectors, who could, once more, have objected. In that case, the application would have been sent to the Ministry of the Environment, at an additional cost.

Pattenden has no problem with the municipal or federal officials involved, just with the framework of the Act. "Anybody could raise objections with impunity," he says, "and we had to get a study and pay for it. We never thought we'd be in over \$100,000 just to build twelve docks, with almost \$55,000 of that being absolutely, completely, and utterly unnecessary." As staggering as that \$100,000 figure is, it could have been worse, if Pattenden hadn't volunteered two years of his time to head up the project, saving the group from having to hire a lead advocate. Pattenden has a message for anyone expecting the government to provide docking for stranded water-access taxpayers: Don't. "You have to pay your own way."

"If the marina were to disappear, we would too."

If Reinhard and Donna Friedrich ever do sell, Anstruther Lake water-access cottagers would face another complication. The lake is entirely within the boundary of a provincial park, and the existing parking lot sits on Crown land that's regulated as parkland. Even if cottagers formed a corporation to purchase the marina, they'd have to reapply for a new LUP for the parking lot. (The Friedrichs' own LUP isn't transferable.) A public boat launch does exist, but as Jim Whelan, North Kawartha's reeve and an Anstruther Lake cottager himself, points out, it's on a small and windy site. "You could never hold a dock there," he says. Where would that leave the lake's water-access cottagers? With a parking lot and public launch, but no docking. Which equates to trailering boats in and out to get to properties. Not a viable option for most.

Mike King has been on Anstruther Lake for 26 years. "The water access has been part of the novelty of it for us," he says. "Even though I'm 67 and have knee and hip trouble, I still don't mind that little trip across the lake. But without a marina, it's a different story." King isn't interested in trailering his boat in and out. "Frankly, if the marina were to disappear, we would too." John Fautley and his wife, Marie Duchesneau, are in the same camp. "It would be a major inconvenience for me," Fautley says. "I'm inexperienced with trailering and would have to buy a new trailer and vehicle." Fautley says that one of the main reasons they bought a water-access cottage was because it was cheaper. He also cherishes the solitude and quiet. "We would have to try to sell, which would be at a loss, and buy a place with road access," Fautley says. If, of course, they could afford it.

Communal support

Common sense suggests that the fate of water-access cottagers should, to an extent, be the concern of the government. After all, the province made money from many of the original sales of Crown land and still collects property tax today. But help isn't coming from that quarter soon. According to a spokesperson for the MNR, the government will not guarantee that boat slips will be available for overnight mooring to cottagers who lose access as the result of the sale of private property. At most, the MNR will maintain access by providing a boat launch.

After hemorrhaging money for the first few years, Donna and Reinhard Friedrich are now operating in the black—but only just. Reinhard doesn't draw a salary, and all profits are reinvested in the marina. The family manages to survive financially only because Donna continues to work full-time as a nurse an hour's drive away in Peterborough. They also cashed in all of their RRSPs and remortgaged three times to help with the improvements. After spending \$27,000 to upgrade the gas pump to current environmental standards, there is nothing more galling to the couple than the sight of a cottager walking by with a jerry can full of cheaper city-bought gas. Others, however, recognize the vital importance of supporting the marina as a lifeline to their own cottages. "We have reiterated this to everyone," says Anstruther Lake Cottagers' Association president Paul Beamish. "Spend money at the marina—keep your boat there, get your gasoline there, shop at the store—because if they are happy financially, we are all happy." Even so, there's no guarantee that Anstruther Lake Marina—or yours—will still be there tomorrow just because that's the way it's always been, ever since anyone can remember.

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