

WE MAY HAVE TO CHANGE TO REMAIN THE SAME

1984

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Vice Commodore

As another wonderful Maine summer draws to a close, it is hard not to be impressed with the accelerating rate of change along the Coast. With the population growth and the new prosperity of New England, has come a surge of interest in the Maine waterfront. There are more boats and less experienced skippers, sometimes totally uninformed with the rules of the road, never mind yachting protocol. There are fewer uncrowded anchorages, more auto traffic and parking pressures near yacht clubs, and it is difficult to find a place to permanently moor a boat. The cities and towns are getting into the act and increased regulation is a certainty.

Not all the growth has been negative. New restaurants which can be reached by water, development of new marina and service facilities such as the Yarmouth project and a rejuvenated Portland Harbor, have been just a few of the positive impacts. There is debate among some about whether a First Class redevelopment of an old fort on Great Diamond Island is better than allowing the derelict buildings to continue to crumble, but I for one favor that particular change.

The Portland Yacht Club, which has always been a terrific organization and facility, is becoming more appreciated when considered in the context of the changes and resultant pressures. Our declining turnover and growing waiting list seem to confirm that membership is highly valued and becoming more so. But, the pressures are getting to us a little bit, too.

With the multitude of summer employment alternatives, finding enough qualified summer employees through Labor Day is difficult and much more costly than it used to be. With the explosion of first class restaurants in the Portland area and a shortage of managers, cooks and kitchen workers, running a seasonal restaurant is a lot harder than it used to be.

With many mothers working and growing competition from countless interesting and worthwhile summertime alternatives, attracting children to a half-day sailing program where the children have to be dropped off in the morning and picked up mid-day, is more difficult.

With costs rising in the Portland area because of the prosperity (forget about the national Consumer Price Index) and taxes rising in Falmouth because of its well-publicized budget increases, keeping dues increases moderate is more difficult.

With increased use of the Club, Handy's, and The Town Landing, resulting traffic and parking problems have prompted the town to react with new parking regulations and some of our neighbors to over-react with the installation of unconscionable high-hurdles obstructing a right-of-way which probably is older than most of our neighbors and our members.

Notwithstanding these and other current and past pressures, the Club has endured and has continued to be a great place for people to enjoy their boats and each other, as it will in the future. But in order to ensure that goes on, we have to acknowledge the pressures and respond accordingly.

When given the opportunity to describe how you, the members, would like the Club to be, through surveys and conversations, most describe it pretty much as it is. Sure, there are suggestions for minor changes, a tweak here and there, but most want to preserve what we have, and I agree.

That is going to take more work than might seem apparent at the outset.

There will be many new challenges over the next few years, but activities that will certainly require attention from the Board of Directors will be:

1. Controlling costs;
2. Developing employment practices and policies which realistically deal with the market;
3. Installing a dining room operation which works for members and operator alike;
4. Keeping the Junior Program an attractive summer alternative; and
5. Protecting our facility, access and use of the anchorage from encroachment.

Increasing costs will have to be dealt with in two ways. The first is ensure that the budget process and dues structure are reflective of the real costs of not only operating the Club, but also to cover capital improvements as they are required. Dave White, our Treasurer, is very focused on this need and will be making recommendations to the Board and the membership.

The second way we need to deal with cost pressures is to systematically analyze how we operate the Club and how we spend our money. There has been no such comprehensive review for many years and that alone suggests that we could uncover inefficiencies. An obvious improvement could result from wider use of a computer for restaurant billing, membership rolls, bookkeeping and mailing list maintenance.

With a 2–3% unemployment rate and prospects for a continuing tight labor market, we have to respond to very strong competition for seasonal employees by ensuring that our compensation levels are appropriate, that the employees are well managed and that the working environment is as pleasant and as much fun as it can be, within reason. Remember some of your great and not so great summer jobs.

David Clough, our new Director of Food and Beverage, has begun his efforts to stabilize the dining operations. It is important that as we enter into arrangements for future years, that the expectations between the Club and the operator be clear and reasonable. The scope and character of the restaurant operation should be clearly defined. It should be economically and operationally feasible for the Club and the operator.

Bob Davis, our new Junior Program Head, under the direction of Board of Director member Leigh Palmer, had a very successful first season and demonstrated sensitivity to the new challenges and flexibility to deal with them. More will be required as additional options become available to area youngsters. As we plan future summers, we may need to consider scheduling changes to make the program practical for the working mothers and program enhancements to keep the kids interested.

Finally, the issue of encroachment which, although not as obvious as the others, is the one I believe we should be the most vigilant of. The Portland Yacht Club has been in its present location for a long time. We have used and maintained the waterfront, our facility and Powerhouse Road for many years in substantially the same way as we intend to use it in the future. We should continue to vigorously assert our lawful right to use Powerhouse Road as we have in the past.

The Yacht Club is a very special place which is important to each of us. It should be protected, preserved and allowed to evolve in a positive way. To ensure that, we may have to change some of the way we do things.