

Marina

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Hub and Michèle Steenbakkers

Home-grown success on Lake Ontario

Nestled in a peaceful natural setting at the head of Collins Bay, eight miles west of the historic Canadian city of Kingston and on the northeastern tip of Lake Ontario, Collins Bay Marina is a safe, efficiently run haven with easy access to varied and scenic sailing waters. Owned and operated by the Steenbakkers family for over 35 years, Collins Bay is the largest and most modern privately owned marina in the region. Hub Steenbakkers CMM, who owns and runs the marina with his wife Michèle, talks shop.

Some of the world's greatest fresh water sailing in Lake Ontario, the world famous Thousand Islands, peaceful and private anchorages, an abundance of national parks and top notch fishing and scuba diving waters give Collins Bay ten out of ten for location. Hub and Michèle Steenbakkers have built on this perfect backdrop to create a marina that dovetails with the local environment and offers a warm welcome to regulars and visitors.

"We are a family owned, hands-on marina that prides itself on professionalism, friendliness and stewardship of the environment," Hub Steenbakkers explains. "We always get great comments about the cleanliness of our yard and washrooms. One customer said we have the cleanest washrooms north of Venezuela!"

Attention to detail has long been a key philosophy behind developing Collins Bay Marina, and develop it the Steenbakkers did – quite literally – as Hub explains: "Dad was a custom home builder in the '60s and bought 18 acres of waterfront property in 1965. It had a farmhouse, which was our cottage and was eventually rebuilt into our house. In 1971 he decided it was time for a change and he dropped the construction business and started a marina – from scratch."

"He sold 13 acres to finance the marina and kept the best five acres for the marina. I was in high school at the time and helped build the docks. They were constructed of western red cedar – fancy by today's standards – and Styrofoam floats. They were built to accommodate our local market of 14-18ft boats. One guy had a 22ft boat – I thought he was the local millionaire!"

"The first year we had 13 boats. Within five years we had 150 boats. Then we were

devastated by the classic case of the federal government building a state-of-the-art, 300-slip marina a few miles away and giving it to the city for \$1. Having no capital expenses and seemingly endless access to government grants, the city operated the marina more as a charity than a business, keeping the rates artificially low."

"It was a very difficult business environment for us. We lost a third of our customers overnight and it was years before we recovered. Most of the other privately operated marinas in the area went bankrupt during this period. Finally, the grants dried up in the mid '90s but it still took several years for the city to realise (with a little help from me) that it was in the marina business, complete with the

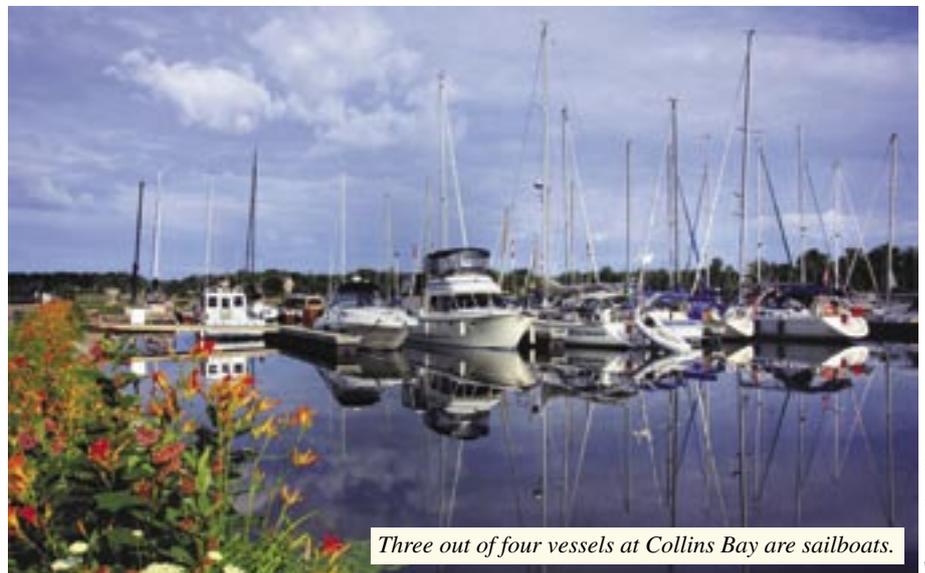
expense side of the ledger sheet. I politely pointed out that the optics of subsidising the municipal marinas (there are two in Kingston now) with tax dollars while keeping the rates below market value didn't look good in the eyes of non-boating tax-payers. That got their attention, they raised the rates and now the business environment is survivable."

Time to refurbish

After leaving the family fold to graduate in electrical engineering at the University of Toronto, and exercising this qualification for eight years in the computer field in Boston and the San Francisco Bay area, Hub Steenbakkers willingly returned in 1986 to take over the day-to-day management of the marina from his father.

By this time – after much hard work – the marina was an established 300-slip 'mom and pop' facility but in need of some modernisation and maintenance. "The first thing I did was build new, state-of-the-art docks and raise the rates. I designed the docks and we built them in-house. We had been dredging annually, bit by bit using home brew equipment Dad built. That was too inefficient so I designed and built a system of barges to ferry dump trucks back and forth to a barge holding an excavator. We used the new equipment on two projects to remove a total of 95,000 cubic yards of silt, clay and rock from the harbour and approach channel."

For Steenbakkers, designing and building the docks (and also the steel power pedestals in use throughout the marina) was simply



Three out of four vessels at Collins Bay are sailboats.

Photo: Jim Vance



Photo: Craig Butler

a way of ensuring he got exactly what he wanted. “I used my engineering background to assess many of the current designs, take the best ideas and add them to my own to develop a strong, simple design that had advantages over the rest.”

The result is a finger-dock design that is very stable and has high freeboard. The T-configuration fingers consist of a 30in or 36in steel pipe with 1/4in wall thickness that runs from the end of one finger to the end of the opposite finger on the other side of the main dock. The main dock is a steel bridge structure that spans one pair of fingers to the next. There is no flotation under the main section so any surface debris (sticks, leaves etc.) easily washes through the marina rather than collecting underneath the dock. Cleats are bolted into the steel structure.

“Our current (third generation) docks have internal bulkheads to prevent catastrophic failure from a leak. They have three coats of epoxy. We use modern manufacturing techniques (flame and plasma cutting) and the docks are built in a special jig that holds all of the pieces in place – the welder never needs to use a square, level or tape measure. The docks are all anchored into place using concrete anchors and galvanised chains.”

Pressure treated timber is used for decking and fascia boards but Steenbakkers is in the

loop regarding composite alternatives too. “I’ve used composite decking on the short ramps leading onto the docks as a test in the highest traffic areas. The decking has held up very well. In general, I like composites but the downsides are high cost and the requirement for more underlying structure since the material can’t span the same distance as wood. I’ve yet to use it for an entire dock but some day I probably will,” he explains.

The docks accommodate 304 boats in the following configurations: 20 × 18ft; 52 × 22ft; 104 × 26ft; 84 × 30ft; 32 × 36ft; and 12 × 42ft. The layout is, however, capable of accommodating a vessel up to 60ft long if required. All docks have finger docks wide enough for dock carts and near shore fingers are built for wheelchair access. Power and water are provided at every slip, as is free-of-charge WiFi.

Customers and facilities

Collins Bay Marina enjoys a six month season, with boats in the water around mid-April (ice permitting) and haul-out complete by the end of October. Due to the proximity of open water, sail boats dominate at around 75%. Half of the marina’s seasonal customers live in Kingston and the surrounding area, and the balance from as far afield as Toronto and Hamilton. Visiting yachts are welcomed for overnight, weekly or

monthly stays but traffic is relatively low at about 1,000 visitor nights per season.

Seasonal staff comprise a general maintenance man, crane operator and four members of staff for fuel dock, dock hand and yard duties. An office manager is responsible for all invoicing, data management and reception tasks and Michèle Steenbakkers takes care of the accounting, staff hiring, training and management.

Slips are available for many sizes of boat – although larger slips are becoming scarce – but the 200-boat capacity storage yard is full every winter. Over 400 boats are lifted each season using a 65-ton Linkbelt hydraulic crane and almost as many masts are stepped or destepped. Masts are stored on wooden bunks during the winter.

Customers also benefit from meticulously clean, private, locked washrooms – adorned with fresh flowers – and access to the marina’s five-acre site, which includes a beautiful expanse of lawn, trees, flower gardens and picnic areas. The marina shares the east shore of the bay with the picturesque Lemoine Point conservation area.

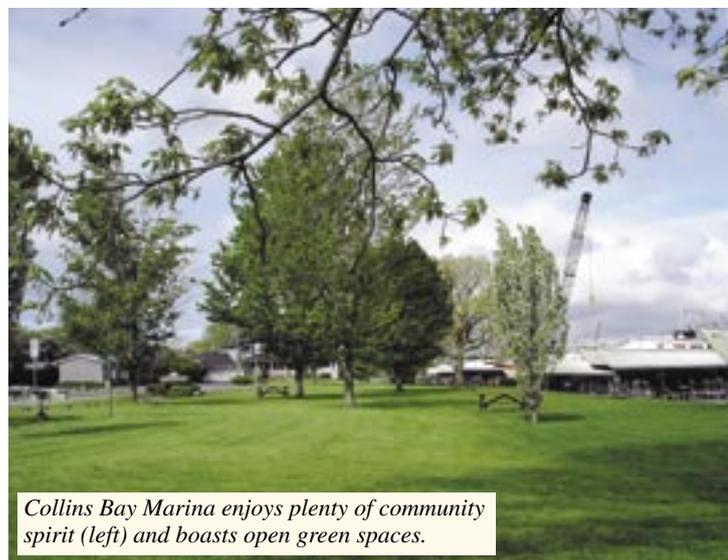
Petrol, diesel, ice, soft drinks and engine oil are available from a dedicated fuel dock and pump-out offered via a Waubauskene vacuum machine that has served the marina well for a number of years.

A large parking area provides plenty of free parking next to the docks and security is good. The site and docks are well lit, the owners live on site year-round with their two children and there is a community of boaters who look out for others in the marina. The area and nearby parks are patrolled regularly and the marina is home to the ‘E. V. McNeil’, the Ontario Provincial Police boat.

The marina is also home to the Collins Bay Yacht Club, formed by a group of marina customers who operate a first class sailing school at the marina and a robust schedule of cruises, races, dinners and other social events. The group operates from a floating clubhouse that the Steenbakkers helped them build.

Environmental awareness

Collins Bay Marina was one of the first – in 1999 – to take part in a clean marina pilot programme run by the Ontario Marine Operators Association (OMOA). The marina was audited and received four anchors, and in



Collins Bay Marina enjoys plenty of community spirit (left) and boasts open green spaces.

Custom-built docks – built by the marina owners.



its second audit achieved five anchors at a time when only 12 out of more than 300 marinas achieved such an accolade.

Michèle Steenbakkers was awarded the DuPont Canada Ecology Award in 1999 for heading up the initial development of the Clean Marina Programme and Hub won OMOA's Robert Eaton Environmental Award in 2004 for his efforts in support of the environment. He was also awarded the Canadian Safe Boating Award for Safeguarding the Environment in 2006 – because of bilge oil socks...

"When we first introduced our Clean Marina Policy in 2003, we asked customers

to sign a Clean Marine Pledge to do the right things for the environment. Note that we introduced it as a pledge, not a contract – this would've been too heavy handed. Given that it was merely a pledge, I felt I needed to add credence to it. So, as a thank you to the customer who signed, I gave out a free sock-style bilge oil absorbent," Steenbakkers explains.

Giving out the bilge socks gave him an opportunity to explain their use and purpose, and to impress upon the customer that the marina was taking environmental issues seriously and thus raise his/her awareness too. "Other marinas heard, admired and adopted our practice of giving away the bilge socks and the net result of

my little idea is that there are now thousands of boats that have oil absorbents in their bilges. That is why I was given the award."

Unsurprisingly, a high level of environmental best practice is evident throughout Collins Bay Marina. Key examples include: timers and motion sensors to avoid wasting electricity; gravel rather than paved car parking areas to prevent pollution running into the water; full water circulation through the docks; reasonable rental rates for a proper dustless sanding system; and plentiful recycling bins for cans, plastics, glass and paper. The marina also accepts and recycles waste oil, antifreeze and batteries free

of charge despite the fact that it does not service boats or sell these products.

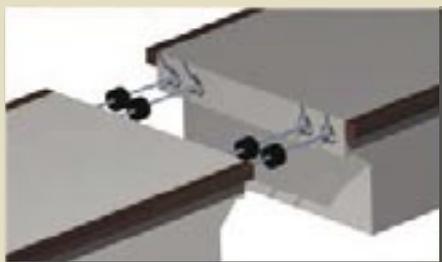
Now and for the future

In terms of infrastructure changes, Steenbakkers has no current plans just 'wishes'. "Within the next couple of years we should dredge and replace some smaller slips with larger ones. I'm building up the capital accounts to accommodate this in the future," he confirms. It is, however, imperative to keep a close eye on things. "So far as main management challenges go, I always say that my biggest negative wildcard is the government. You never know when they can throw a curveball at you by changing legislation that affects your business. You never know when they are going to compete with you by pumping grants into the local municipally owned marinas."

He also maintains a realistic view of the current economic downturn. "Given that we don't sell or service boats we don't have a negative exposure there. Boaters hang onto their boats as long as they can – it is very difficult to sell a boat in a bad economy. As such, any downturn in our business typically lags the broader downturn by at least a year, so really it is too early to tell."

In the meantime, Hub and Michèle will continue to do what they do best; running a successful marina like a much loved family home. Everything about Collins Bay Marina – from its initial development to its current infrastructure – has been customised to suit the precise needs of boating enthusiasts, and always with a view to preserving the marina's greatest asset; the beauty of its natural surroundings.

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