

## Federal Grant Programs Key to Coastal Marina's Renovation

A search for a comparable marina to complete a business plan forced Peter Davidson, Superintendent for the Corpus Christi Marina, to check well beyond the Texas coastline. He expanded his search to take in both the east and the west coasts. Davidson was able to find 11 marinas of similar size and capabilities within the United States that could be used as benchmarks. The list included one other Texas marina and several other comparable marinas in Florida, California, New York and Michigan. On a closer examination, Davidson found that Corpus Christi's long list of amenities and recent improvements fared well in the side-by-side comparison.

This is a far cry from the marina's standing when Davidson first took on the management role in 1989. He claims he was given free-reign in his efforts to set about improving the marina and in his words, basically told to "paddle his own canoe."

While technically a municipal marina, there were no tax funds for operation. Davidson recognized that he needed to operate the marina as an enterprise to be successful. So Davidson dipped his oars in the water and began to do some serious paddling.

The marina was originally built in the 1930s, with the last improvements being made in the 1940s. By the time Davidson came on the scene, he was discouraged with the amount of disrepair. "Everything was falling down and the bathrooms were a disgrace."

In those early days, Davidson recalls how they lost a bid on a large event with 36 boats after an advance scout checked out the marina. The last disparaging remark Davidson heard was "We can't use these bathrooms!" Davidson quickly realized the marina was not going to entice visitors or bring in big events until significant improvements were made.

Determined to turn things around, Davidson began researching grant opportunities and in the years 2000 and 2001 applied for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) Boating Infrastructure Grant (BIG) program non-competitive grants, totaling \$200,000. The Service's BIG program provides Federal grant funds to states to construct, renovate, and maintain facilities with features for transient boaters in vessels 26 feet or more in length. Davidson approached the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) to see if his projects qualified for BIG grants. TPWD guided Davidson through the process and successfully secured needed funds.

Congress passed the Clean Vessel Act (CVA) in 1992 to help reduce pollution from vessel sewage discharges and Davidson saw this opportunity and applied for a CVA grant. The water improvement proposal for the marina met the criteria and Davidson received CVA grants for four pump-out systems for a total of \$123,000.

Davidson saw the CVA as a means of being able to clean the waters and eliminate dumping. "When the CVA was first passed, I jumped at the chance to apply. The waters here were filthy," said Davidson.

The CVA and BIG federal grants provided seed funding for major improvements to the Corpus Christi Municipal Marina. Along with the required matching funds from the marina, the federal grants were used to build a set of bathrooms and a laundry facility. These modern facilities made a huge difference to boaters and transient visitors according to Davidson. It also improved economic development along the city waterfront and downtown.

Economic growth from recreational boating in Texas is significant, according to research conducted by the Recreational Marine Research Center at Michigan State University. There are 12 million registered boats in the United States, with 577,063 registered in Texas. Research also revealed that Texas has 17,181 boating jobs related to boat building and services, with an additional 46,953 jobs created from recreational boating-related spending in Texas.

After improvements at the marina, the Corpus Christi area was also able to see an increase in recreational boating-related spending. According to a 2004 study the area saw a 4.4 million increase in economy from just two boating events – the world J22 Regatta and the world Optimist Regatta, which the Yacht Club at the marina hosted using marina facilities. Davidson said, “The marina went from being a turn-off to an inviting location and everyone is seeing the benefits.”

The location of the marina is ideal, it is even recognized as a Safe Harbor during severe weather conditions, but Davidson firmly believes many wouldn't have chosen Corpus Christi if it wasn't for the amenities at the marina and proximity to downtown area. He also notes the marina is near several of the Service's National Wildlife Refuges and world class birding and fishing locations. Davidson learned from marina users that many birders travel to the area just to see endangered whooping cranes, or else to fish in popular bay and Gulf waters.

With great pride, Davidson then goes on to share that improvements made for recreational boaters have greatly benefited marine life. After implementing water improvement practices and installing pumpout units, the Corpus Christi Municipal Marina received the first “Clean Marina” designation in the State of Texas.

“These pumpout stations have really helped clean the waters,” claims Davidson. “The marina waters are tested every two weeks and we keep one pumpout unit open 24 hours and it is free – even to boaters not using our marina. Today the fishing is marvelous and the water is clean. I can see dolphins from my office in the mornings.”

More than 70 events are hosted at the marina every year. Davidson firmly believes this is because today the Corpus Christi Marina has a number of desirable amenities. These include floating and fixed docks, 600 boat slips, clean and modern bathroom and laundry facilities, a fuel station, free sewage pumpout, 24-hour security and more. The marina also offers free transient boat slips for two nights in a reciprocal agreement with out-of-state marinas, further helping stimulate the local economy. Davidson estimates the marina sees 1,100 to 1,200 visiting boats a year.

Asked about the importance in providing transient boat slips and Davidson replies, “People generally are under the impression that boating is for the rich. That's not the case.”

Davidson believes 99% of boaters at his marina are just “regular people,” and boating is a hobby. “In some cases, they [transient boaters] are struggling to pay the boat slip fee. By providing transient slips, we are throwing them a line.”

Having accomplished so much, one would think Davidson would want to sit back and enjoy the fruits of his labor. But Davidson has a long-term vision. He is already in the midst of looking at even more improvements for the marina that he hopes to complete in 2015. Davidson was recently awarded another Federal BIG grant to build more transient slips (30-45 feet in length).

Construction of the new slips is expected to start in the New Year. “It is a necessity. We ran out of the 30-45 foot boat slips,” says Davidson.

Davidson has learned a lot since receiving his first grant and knows how to make every dollar and matching funds stretch to gain the maximum benefit. This time he is contracting with a design and build company that has in-house engineers. He is also looking at using higher-quality materials to provide a longer life span of the facilities. This is expected to gain significant cost savings that will benefit marina users and the community.

“Boats of today are like modern RVs. We are building to meet today’s needs and for the future,” says Davidson.

To meet those anticipated needs, Davidson is also applying for another CVA grant for an additional pumpout station. “With the increased number of boating slips, we will need another pumpout station. That is how we will use funds from the CVA grant.” Currently the ratio is 4 pumpouts to 600 slips. Development plans will include 5 pumpouts for 700 slips.

Davidson says, “The pumpout units encourage use, eliminates dumping of waste in the ocean and keeps our waters clean. This not only benefits recreationists, it also benefits marine life. Dolphins and turtles are swimming in these clean waters.”

The CVA and BIG grant programs are based on a user-pay user-benefit model. Funds for the CVA and BIG grant programs are derived from excise taxes on fishing equipment, motorboat and small engine fuels, import duties and interest.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service supports partnerships that benefit the public, and fish and wildlife conservation. To learn more about the Service and federal grants, visit:  
[www.fws.gov/southwest/federal\\_assistance/index.html](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/federal_assistance/index.html)