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Captain's Corner

Capt. Lyman Louis

There is an interesting quirk of human nature that baffles me. Why do some boaters spend tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars on their boat, just to leave it in a rickety, run down marina trying to save a couple of bucks?

During the early days of January many boaters in Portland, Vancouver, and Scappoose found out the actual cost of moorage. Nearly 250 covered slips were lost as up to two inches of ice rained down on the area. At least six boats were sunk under the weight of their marina's roof.

While in one sense this is tragic, in another sense it is predictable. I hope to point out three things I look for when shopping for a marina: boats, docks, and Harbormasters.

What condition are the other boats in? This can be a tip off as to the type of neighbor you will have in a marina. If all of the boats are clean, in fairly good condition, and regularly used, it is a good indication that the marina tenants spend some time in the marina.

Having neighbors in a marina can be critical if your boat develops a leak or is about to sink under the weight of the roof. While patrolling the marinas during our ice storm I saw very few boat owners at their boats. One or two people making checks, however, can have a significant impact on the situation.

What condition are the docks and other structures in? While one component, a marinas age is no indication of potential problems.

Many older marinas in the area suffered no harm in the ice because they are generally very well maintained. Broken or damaged boards are replaced, and the roof is regularly checked for structural integrity. When necessary, floatation is replaced so finger piers don't ride low or bounce heavily when walked on.

Repairs, when they are made, should be done with safety in mind. If the Harbormaster's idea of "fixing" a broken section of dock is to paint the offending area, keep looking.

Harbormasters are the glue that hold a marina together. If they are good, the marina will showcase their efforts. They take care of, and are proud of their marinas. Additionally, the really good ones keep a close eye on their customer's boats.

If your boat was damaged during the ice storm and you didn't get a call until after the damage, you've probably got a Harbormaster issue in your marina.

There is a fine legal line here. Marina's do not want to create a bailment when they rent a slip to you. "Bailment" is a legal term meaning, in this case, that the marina would be responsible for anything that happened to your boat while left in their marina.

In fact, most lease agreements with marinas will have this situation spelled out: you, not the marina are responsible for everything that happens to your boat. The marina is only responsible for providing you a space to moor it.

However, some common sense should apply here. A marina owner or Harbormaster that does not call until after your boat has been damaged, despite knowledge that your boat is in harms way, has probably been negligent.

By way of analogy, if a Harbormaster sees a boat leaking gas, diesel, or motor oil into the waterways and does not take steps to resolve the problem will face stiff penalties. I submit that a Harbormaster who sees the potential for damage to the boats in their marina and does nothing to

mitigate the danger is solely responsible for any damage that occurs.

In one case that I am very familiar with, literally dozens of boats could have been removed prior to the collapse of the roofs. All that would have been required is a conscientious Harbormaster. Instead, those boat owners are now faced with thousands of dollars of repairs and the loss of their pride and joy.

So, while I recommend looking over the docks and the other boats in a prospective marina it really comes down to knowing and trusting your Harbormaster. Good ones are hard to find. They are extremely helpful and usually hard at work. Bad ones are a good reason to keep searching for your boat's next home.

See you on the rivers,

Capt. Lyman Louis

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