

Alton Marina battles the elements amid improvement efforts

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ALTON - Mother Nature may have started out the New Year by giving the Alton Marina the cold shoulder, but the River Bend Growth Association preferred a warm reception when it awarded the marina Business of the Month for January.

"There are so many members to choose from for this honor, and we are truly grateful to be picked," General Manager Karen Baker-Brcic said. "It thrilled us to death when we found out. I think the (RBGA) really does a lot to make the community gel. It is always involved in something, and we are very lucky to have it here."

Baker-Brcic, who is starting her third season as manager for the marina, also serves as an ambassador for the business-based organization.

"One of the smartest things I ever did was join the RBGA," she said. "I get to see how things work, and it is such a nice asset for the community. It is the link that ties the local business community together. It connects us all, and keeps everyone informed. We are glad to be involved."

Since Parrot Pointe Inc. took over the marina in April 2008, there has not seemed to be more than a day or two without some unexpected event taking place. Some of the less desirable occurrences include two floods, two fires and two major windstorms. The summer of 2008 was plagued by flooding, and a windstorm last May destroyed the roof of the largest dock.

"I am keeping an eye out for the locusts these days," Baker-Brcic said, laughing. "It is an ongoing thing these days to be on the cautious side."

Currently, the marina is dealing with being surrounded by a frozen river that, while attractive to look at, is not very functional for a boat dock.

"We have not had ice like this in 20 years," Baker-Brcic said. "I'll be glad when it melts and things get back to normal."

In addition to the challenges, there also have been impressive accomplishments. A grand opening celebration in September 2008 proved to be an overwhelming success, and a steady increase in slipholders has required the marina to expand the number of slips.

"The Alton Marina was constructed with 200 slips in 1996, and was expanded in 1998 and again in 2006 for a total of 310 slips," Baker-Brcic said. "Over the past 13 years, the Alton Marina

has drawn thousands of visitors from all over the world. The marina has repeatedly hosted items of interest to our local community, such as the Nina replica and the antique boat show. We feel the Alton Marina is the gateway to Alton and the River Bend area."

The management team feels strongly that excellent customer service, coupled with community outreach, has been the key to success when nationwide, the industry is down 20 percent.

"We are a new management of 18 months," Baker-Brcic said. "In a down economy we have increased occupancy at the marina from 48 percent to 82 percent, and that is while overcoming (natural disasters).

"We offer events now to both the public and the slipholders. The Alton Marina is the only Mississippi River marina to offer concierge service. We (have) a resort atmosphere without leaving your home area; you can vacation every weekend after cutting your lawn."

The marina has sponsored or been involved with countless social events during the past year. A new picnic pavilion on the upper level and a renovated and expanded menu and shop attract regular customers, temporarily docked travelers, and the local community alike.

"We are ready to kick off our 2010 season," Baker-Brcic said. "We are looking forward to an exciting and fun (year) for our boaters. We also are hoping to revive the lighted boat regalia; we just need to talk to the proper authorities first and make sure we go through the proper channels."

Small hospitality touches make a big difference as well, according to the marina's manager. The restrooms and shower areas have been renovated to be more functional and attractive, and are stocked with complimentary soap and shampoo. Cleanliness is paramount for the showers, pool, hot tub and laundry facilities.

The delicatessen, open to the public, now offers a breakfast menu.

Baker-Brcic said being recognized as Business of the Month makes the challenges and hurdles of the past 18 months worth the "why me" moments sometimes felt among the employees and management.

"When it comes to our crew, I think an award like this creates more camaraderie and makes them proud of all they have accomplished here," she said. "They have really been through the ringer this past year."