



## ICOYC AMERICAS' REGIONAL CONFERENCE ANNAPOLIS YACHT CLUB - 11-12 October, 2015

The 4<sup>th</sup> annual ICOYC Americas Regional Conference was hosted by the Annapolis Yacht Club on October 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Council Delegates from the Annapolis, Chicago, Eastern, Long Beach, Newport Harbor, Royal Canadian (Toronto), Royal Vancouver, San Francisco, Seattle, Southern, and St Francis Yacht Clubs were joined by guest delegates from Coral Reef YC (Miami) and Royal Southern YC (Hamble, UK) and partners.

The conference opened in the Skipjack Room of the Annapolis Yacht Club overlooking the United States Sailboat Show, the largest on the water sailboat show in North America. After a warm welcome by RC Jim Ellis of Annapolis YC, President John McNeil introduced Gary Jobson who reminded us that Yacht Clubs continue to be the cornerstones of sailing and he congratulated us on our ongoing efforts to collaborate and to move the sport forward.

### REINVENTING THE CLUB

The conference began in earnest on Monday morning with an inspiring presentation by Commodore Greg Miarecki of the Chicago Yacht Club. He described CYC's reform initiatives over the past several years. Careful capital planning, strategic planning, and refocusing its efforts towards on the water activities and delivering tangible member value were key components of this initiative. CYC built a comprehensive capital budget, hired a waterfront director and keelboat director, introduced new distance racing formats to the Chicago area, purchased a fleet of Sonars for member usage, and stepped up its efforts to host world-class regattas.

In terms of its leadership, CYC has moved towards younger racing sailors. All three of its Commodores were younger than 50 years of age at their election. Under their leadership, the Club began implementation of a new strategic plan, which called for even more focus on the water, with new paddleboard and kayak offerings. CYC also completely revamped its food and beverage team, emphasized a renewed focus on membership recruitment and retention, and launched a number of new community service and engagement initiatives. CYC also added new activities to drive member usage, including a number of women's activities (happy hours, networking event and Women on the Water -racing Club Sonars) and activities focused on families.

Engagement is a key goal of CYC's new Flag. For example, Flag officers searched the database to look for members with the potential to become the next level of leadership both on Committees and on the Board and these members were encouraged to get involved. Commodore Miarecki writes a two paragraph e-mail each week to the membership in order to engage members.

The results of all of these changes are quite impressive and include: a substantial increase in operating revenues; a 50% reduction in resignations; a significant increase in membership; more events being sold out; and, a substantial increase in membership engagement. In summary, Commodore Miarecki provided these conclusions from the CYC experience:

1. Strategic planning is essential, as is **aggressive** implementation.

2. Yacht clubs must focus **on the water**.
3. F&B is a critical aspect – **everyone eats**.
4. Obsess about **member value**.
5. “Youth movement” is generating excitement among **all** member classes.
6. Actively cultivating **young** talent is key.
7. Focus on the **entire family** drives positive results.
8. Clubs must be led by active, **serious** boaters.
9. Club leaders must adopt a “**one Club**” mentality, and actively promote “crossover” between different groups and fleets.
10. **Active** leadership is essential.

### **CLUB OWNED KEELBOATS – IS IT STILL WORKING?**

One of the common themes in the ongoing effort to keep “Intermediate Members” engaged in the Club was the provision of a Club owned keelboat fleet to enable them to transition from race team participation to keel boat match racing and team racing.

Most Clubs either: owned boats (including: J24’s J22’s, Sonars, Harbor 20’s & Elliot 6’s); chartered boats from another organization; or borrowed boats from Club members. Only one Club did not have a “captive” keelboat fleet.

Invariably, Clubs that owned keelboats charge for their use and have dedicated staff for maintenance but only one Club (which has the boats in use 7 days a week in season) was able to “break even”. However, all Clubs with keelboat fleets felt that they were important for member engagement and to serve as a bridge for younger members to stay engaged in racing and involvement in the Club.

One Club has started a fleet of radio controlled sailboats that they race in the club’s indoor pool (with the help of large fans) during the winter months to keep members engaged. The races have become extremely popular as the “heats” are televised with a live feed from the pool to the bar for those not racing. A brilliant idea!

### **FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR MEMBERS AT AWAY REGATTAS**

This topic arose in part because 8 of the 17 participants in the latest New York Yacht Club Invitational Regatta were ICOYC Clubs and many of the Clubs in attendance in Annapolis have incurred the very substantial expense of supporting a team for the event.

The discussion was led off by describing the fund raising efforts one west coast Club that enabled them to participate in the last two Invitationals. These efforts included primarily the direct solicitation of donations from members as well as the use of a Sailing Foundation to support the extraordinary cost, especially if the team must charter a boat to participate.

Another Club that has participated in all three Invitationals, acknowledged that they could not have done it without the participation of a key member willing to have his Swan 42 be used almost exclusively for the event.

However, many expressed the concern that, while their Club did support members, especially youth members, participation in away regattas, they didn't believe that funding for the Invitational was a reasonable expenditure given the extraordinary amount and the relatively limited number of Club members that would benefit from it. Others felt that it was a reasonable investment in that it became a "Club wide" event. A large number of members had actually travelled to Newport, simply to spectate and that, together with the prestige of being invited to participate, added tremendously to the concept of "member value".

It was agreed that the Invitational was an exceptional event and not one in which every Club was either willing or able to participate. The discussion turned to whether Clubs were willing to pay for their members to attend away regattas and if so, their guidelines for doing so.

While most Clubs appear to have dedicated funds for such expenses, many are very limited in what they do pay for such as only entry fees or only travel and regalia but not for food and accommodation. While most US Clubs appear to have an associated sailing foundation that is able to fund at least part of these expenses, Canadian tax laws do not permit members to receive tax receipts for donations to their in-club "Corinthian Funds" or "Olympic Funds". As a result the Canadian Clubs assess their members automatically for these Funds but the members have the ability to "opt out" of the assessment and about 20% of members do so.

All Clubs who provide such support have dedicated committees to "vet" applications for support and have a set of criteria to determine whether: a) the event in question is one that that the Club is willing to support; and b) the applicants have the appropriate skills to properly compete in the event.

#### **ALTERNATE VOTING METHODS – ONLINE VOTING**

After an absolutely splendid buffet lunch, the afternoon session began with a presentation on alternate voting methods for Club meetings. The only Club to adopt such procedures so far did so because despite having over 2000 voting members, only about 250 to 350 members would actually show up at an AGM or SGM to vote. As this group tended to heavily weighted with older members, they could be successful in showing up in sufficient numbers to effectively block any proposed motion to which they objected (usually dues increases).

Nevertheless, the change to online and telephone voting was embraced by the membership as sufficient numbers in support of the initiative did show up to vote for the change. An obvious issue with such a system is how to ensure that the membership is sufficiently informed before voting on an issue without actually attending a meeting.

In the case of issues such as by-law changes or dues increases, this is dealt with by using various media (mail, newsletters, website and e-mail) and is helped by the fact that over 60% of the members have opted to receive Club communications by e-mail.

For the voting of candidates for positions on the Board, an "all candidates meeting" is held at which all candidates for contested Board positions have an opportunity to demonstrate their suitability. As well, all candidates for office have an opportunity to broadcast a limited campaign statement through the Club's media. This required the implementation of an election campaign policy that appointed a Chief Electoral Officer to ensure that these

statements are made with respect, dignity and fairness to fellow members.

The actual web based voting system was developed and operated by Simply Voting ([www.simplyvoting.com](http://www.simplyvoting.com)) and the cost to the Club is about \$18M the first year and \$12M thereafter. It can also be used for membership surveys.

Concern was expressed that members would not inform themselves and simply vote “no” regardless of the issue because they would not be subject to the “peer group pressure” that a meeting entails. This does not seem to have occurred as the first vote for a dues increase passed easily as apparently the need for the increase was adequately explained.

The change has resulted in an entire segment of the membership being re-enfranchised as almost 900 members voted, a 250% increase over the most votes at any AGM or SGM previously. As well, it is likely the case that many of these newly voting members are somewhat younger than those who traditionally show up at meetings and thus the change has re-engaged a demographic of the Club that is crucial to its long term success.

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA – HOW TO ENGAGE IT AND MANAGE IT**

Most Clubs present were split with about half not being very far along using social media and the other half making significant levels of progress. A webinar based “Social Media for Yacht Clubs Boot Camp” firm touts the benefits as including the ability to: increase revenue; attract new members; retain members and reduce the average membership age.

While not all of the delegates were convinced of the merits, one Club has “jumped in with both feet” and has a closed group Facebook page that does daily postings of everything from dining room menus to race results. They also have a member driven Twitter feed that publishes race results from the race course. The junior fleet has an open Facebook page with 775 likes. Another Club has 6 closed Facebook pages for various member groups within the Club and tried Twitter but couldn’t get traction.

Most Clubs on Facebook have “closed” pages and one has 3700 likes. They publish a quarterly newsletter and a downloadable monthly calendar on Facebook. Another has involvement with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Flickr, re-tweeting member posts and also posting on Instagram and Flickr.

Virtually all Clubs with active Facebook pages also continuously monitor the pages by a communications committee and/or by dedicated support staff. Many Clubs closely monitor these media on Google Alerts and one was heartened to find that, when harsh and inappropriate comments were being made on the Facebook pages, it was the members themselves who countered the criticism. As such the pages have become “self-policing” without the need for the Board to step in and impose restraints.

However another Club experienced a group of disaffected members who created their own closed Facebook page, complete with unauthorized Club regalia, and used it to disparage the Board and espouse their own candidates for office. The Club managed to have the page taken down but not before significant “damage” was done.

The conclusion is that, if a Club is to have any hope of engaging younger members, it must be involved in social media but vigilance is required and a dedicated staff person is needed to monitor various media using Google Alert as well as a daily review.

### **ATTRACTING AND KEEPING YOUNGER MEMBERS**

Once again, the discussion of social media was a good segue to the perennial topic of how our Clubs are to attract and keep younger members. Many clubs have scaled dues and entrance fees steeply in an attempt to move the bulge in the demographic curve to the left, the average age of Club members stubbornly remaining in the 60's.

Some of the more interesting ways in which Clubs have striven to meet this challenge included:

1. a "Serve to Sail" Program where a prospective young member with skills needed by the Club can receive a substantial discount to their initiation fees putting in 50 hours of sailing related service to the Club. It adds 50 members a year using this program.
2. a "fast-track" for membership applications from a prospective member who is a member of another recognized YC and has moved to the Club's city from elsewhere;
3. extending the discount both for dues and initiation fees to age 30 to facilitate young members joining and staying with the Club in their early working years,
4. enabling Intermediate members attending University in the Club's city to pay the same dues as non-resident members (away at University) to encourage them to remain members during this period.

### **THE BEST AND THE WORST THING THAT WE DID WAS: .....**

It has become a bit of a tradition to end these conferences with a bit of a "tell all" session where we each tout our greatest success and admit our greatest failure. For obvious reasons, no Clubs or delegates will be mentioned by name.

The experiences of many were similar and generally related to the interaction between the Board and the membership and sometimes between the Board and the General Manager. Remarkably, while a number of Clubs indicated that the best thing that they did was to fire their General Manager, many said that in fact it was the hiring of their current GM that was the best thing that they ever did.

Others said that one of the best things that they did was to discipline a member that had become a bit of a "wrecking ball" in the Club and that there was "nothing like a pelt on the wall" to get the membership's full attention and smarten up the grumblers.

One delegate said that one of the worst things was to respond to an "incendiary" e-mail from a disaffected member with a thoughtful, e-mail response, only to have the response excerpted, edited and broadcast to "the western world" as evidence of the delegate's lack of: competence; knowledge; concern; engagement, etc. Instead, the message was to telephone the disaffected member to discuss their complaint and NOT to respond to the e-mail.

## **COPENHAGEN FORUM TOPICS**

To conclude, each of the delegates were asked to pick one topic or issue that they would like to see explored and discussed at the ICOYC Commodores Forum in September of 2016. As you might expect there was considerable agreement on a number of topics and, in order of popularity, they were:

1. Capital Replacement – Analysis and Funding (including disaster planning) - 6
2. Governance – including recruiting, leadership development and structure – 4
3. Membership – including development, discipline and family engagement - 3
4. Cost benefit analysis – for F&B; House; Programs; Outstations; - 3
5. Staffing – paid staff v. volunteer members – 2
6. Sponsorship – the care and feeding of – 2
7. External Relations – with local governments, first nations, etc. 2

## **CLOSING DINNER**

Having completely exhausted topics the delegates retired to freshen up for the closing dinner and, once again, AYC did not disappoint. The unwise stuffed themselves with appetizers of freshly shucked oysters, famous Chesapeake blue crab and giant prawns only to sit down to an outstanding dinner of yet more crab, lobster AND beef tenderloin – an unforgettable “surf and turf combo”. When General Manager Brian Asch introduced the AYC Executive Chef, Michael Herr, some unruly delegates attempted to hire him away on the spot! It was a delightful end to a great conference in a great venue. Thank you AYC!