



# Launching Community

## Great Harbor Yacht Club

By Marli Guzzetta



Clubhouse groundbreaking at Great Harbor by Blake Drexler, Commodore Norwood Davis, Gary McCarthy and project manager Tim Shea.

Photo by Fiji Greenberg

At least once a year in December, the conflict between Mr. Potter and George Bailey in “It’s a Wonderful Life” reminds America to be suspicious of big development.

Nantucket, however, is probably no bigger than Bedford Falls, and its year-round citizens face more than their share of Mr. Potters all year. This is why, in 2004, when Connecticut businessmen and summer residents Gary McCarthy and Blake Drexler announced their intentions to purchase the harbor-front property of Grey Lady Marine on Washington Street extension and then transform it into what they hoped to be one of the best yacht clubs in the nation, everyone from residents to town officials lined up to offer objections.

“I think part of the lack of understanding, initially, was because people felt like we were coming in to exploit Nantucket resources,” Drexler said.

The grievances could be summarized into three major questions: Would the

harbor’s health be preserved? Would the town be able to lift boats out of the harbor? Would the boating public be kept from a significant percentage of the harbor front?

These valid concerns came up in the form of lawsuits and appeals—to date 27 in all.

McCarthy identified one of the “most distressing” parts of the process as the movement by the town to take the property by eminent domain in April of 2004. “I stood up at Town Meeting in front of nine hundred-plus residents to explain why we thought the taking was not appropriate, and the town agreed,” he said.

All lawsuits concluded this spring as the stewards of the Great Harbor Yacht Club, town representatives and local environmental advocates finally came to their compromises.

Selectman Brian Chadwick described the process as a “rocky start with a

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Great Harbor Yacht Club's waterfront location, once home to Grey Lady Marine, shown above in 2004 .  
Photo by William Ferrall

misunderstanding on both parts before being able to come to an agreement.”

“In my opinion, I'm glad its finally coming to an end,” added Chadwick, who, along with the Board of Selectmen, finalized the project's Chapter 91 certification at the beginning of August. Chadwick feels the project is “absolutely a good thing.”

“We're certainly not getting what was once offered voluntarily, but those days are gone and the town, by its own actions, lost out on those deals,” he said. “The main point is that the area has been cleaned up, access to the water is guaranteed, and boat service is guaranteed.”

McCarthy and Drexler discovered what many seasonal residents trying to win favor on this island have discovered: It often takes action over words, a casting of lots with residents of the town, to find one's place amongst the George Baileys. “As much as we told them we were here for the right reasons, we had to show them, and it took some time,” according to Drexler.

In the process of adapting the club's plans to suit various specifications—some legal, some environmental, some cultural—McCarthy and Drexler wound

up performing their own versions of Herculean labors, whose outcomes will prove to benefit not only the club but also the island and its residents.

At the top of this list: Great Harbor Yacht Club is spending \$1.1 million to bury all Washington Street utilities, even though only a quarter of these utilities lie on the club's property.

The club is realigning Washington Street to accommodate a bike path, which will allow for safer movement between the rotary and town. It has also donated an additional \$75,000 to the town's bike path fund.

Great Harbor Yacht Club is implementing a system of groundwater facilitation that removes 98% of the impurities from groundwater runoff before it enters the harbor—more than what applies to the Great Harbor Yacht Club area.

It also spent upwards of \$750,000 to construct a boat repair and storage facility, which it will lease to Nantucket Community Sailing at a cost of \$1 per year for the next 20 years.

During the club's off season, local schools will have use of squash and tennis courts as well as the docks and piers, and the general public will have

access to an eight foot-wide walking path around the waterfront. They are also instituting a state-of-the-art helix mooring system to protect scallop beds.

“I think we leveraged a lot of public benefit out of them, and they were cooperative on all of those issues,” said Nantucket Planning Board Director Andy Vorce, who called the underground utilities “major” and stated that the developers have two years from the end of litigation to complete their infrastructure improvement projects.

“Also, when it was just the marina, there was no public access over there,” Vorce added. “Now, the club has it in the form of an easement that goes up the side where the travel lift is, across the face of the bulkhead, down a set of stairs to a sandy area in the front, and that was all negotiated through the planning board process.”

### Beneficial cooperation

As a result of the settlement with the Nantucket Land Council, the club will replace all damaged eelgrass by 10 to 1, though the Nantucket Land Council would rather have a full removal of floating docks to preserve





*This page, architectural renderings of GHYC's planned clubhouse dining room and ships model room.*

the harbor's eel grass, a crucial habitat for scallops.

Disappointed by the original decisions of the Nantucket Conservation Commission, the Nantucket Land Council is pleased, however, that they are part of the mitigation planning process.

"I wouldn't say we achieved everything we wanted, or received and got everything we wanted through the settlement, but the resolution does something to protect sensitive eelgrass resources," said Nantucket Land Council Executive Director Cormac Collier.

McCarthy and Drexler said that their collaborations with the town has yielded a few unexpected benefits for the yacht club design as well. For example, having pool facilities off site has allowed room for a lawn that will undoubtedly come in handy for weddings and events. Also, moving the club back from the harbor, where it was initially proposed, has also enabled harbor access from both sides of the site.

"Frankly, everything that's happened up until now has happened for a reason," Drexler said. "We don't harbor any bad feelings about the process. The process is a good process, and the product that comes out is better than what goes in, and that's certainly the case here."

As of May, the club has zero pending lawsuits and 300 members. Currently, memberships cost \$350,000 annually but are expected to reach \$400,000 upon the project's completion.

Great Harbor Yacht Club has already opened a cutting edge fitness center and

spa on Washington Street, a state-of-the-art boat storage and repair facility on Arrowhead Drive and a tennis and swim club on Nobadeer Farm Road, which includes eight clay courts, a heated pool, a snack bar and the club pro shop.

Modeled after the old Nantucket Steamship building and designed by architect Hart Howerton with Lyman Perry Architects, GHYC's clubhouse on Washington Street extension will include an indoor-outdoor dining room and bar with a sweeping harbor view, a club meeting room built from a 1.5-story antique post and beam structure, a regatta room and a ships model room.

McCarthy maintained that the club has entered a new era both internally and in the arena of public opinion.

"Up until this summer, it's been a development project but it's not anymore," McCarthy noted. "It's a living, breathing yacht club that exists apart from us. It's a club of the membership, directed by a great new club manager, Mike Mooney, and by Norwood Davis, our excellent commodore, who's provided most of the direction of the club's programs going forward."

The men say there was no single time when they turned the corner regarding public opinion. They feel they have inched their way to being a welcomed member of the community, "one person at a time."

"It's a matter of trust," McCarthy said. "When we started, we didn't have the trust of the community, because people didn't know us that well and they couldn't evaluate if we were going to do exactly what we said we were going to do. Our mission now is adjusting more to the needs of the town and as a steward of the environment. We're looking to being proactive and taking a leadership role, having such a prominent place on the harbor."

Drexler added that the Great Harbor Yacht Club has in its membership major island philanthropists who want a club that's consistent with their ethics.

"We're representing them as an institution they can use, but also in a way they want to be represented, as stewards of the Sound," Drexler said. "We really feel like we're guys who are doing the right thing for Nantucket. We want to get the word out. We're here for generations. We're a long-term player." N

*For more information on the Great Harbor Yacht Club and on becoming a member, go to [ghyc.com](http://ghyc.com) or call 508-325-5200.*

