

Ocracoke Seafood Company Faces Deadline



Local fisherman and charter captain Ronnie O'Neal pauses during a hard day's work on the water. He is one of several fishermen whose livelihood depends on the fish house just as theirs depends on fishermen like him. Photo by Susse Wright.

by Jamie Tunnell

As this Observer issue's deadline approached, the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association (OWWA) faced their own deadline to save Ocracoke's last fish house. Association volunteers have lobbied for the past year to raise enough money to purchase the existing business and leasehold interests from South Point Market, the last fish house operation on the island. The cost was \$325,000.00 and the deadline for that \$325,000 was June 1, 2007. While the lobbying effort was in full swing, OWWA's organizational directors worked on the day to day business operations of Ocracoke Seafood Co. to pay the Fish House lease and in turn, keep the fish house open to keep the local livelihood, culture, and daily operations of a retail seafood market alive.

The total project cost is

business \$325,000.00 and necessary renovations, equipment and fixtures \$175,000.00. A bill for the required \$500,000 is pending before the NC House and Senate. OWWA is hopeful that this legislation will pass, especially with the recent awareness of North Carolina's disappearing waterfront. OWWA's success with pulling together to save their livelihood is being used as a prototype.

Another problem facing OWWA was gap financing. Even if the legislation passes, funds would not be available until early October. That is when Hyde County's Revolving Loan Fund committee stepped in and on May 7, the Hyde County Commissioners voted to use its Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) to issue a short-term loan to the Ocracoke Fish House so that the Fish House would not be forced to shut down. The bridge loan will allow the Fish House to secure its lease while awaiting an

appropriation of funds from the General Assembly this session, which would be available in the fall.

"There is apprehension and concern among the fishermen," said Robin Payne, organizer of OWWA. "They are anxious to see the money in place in the time period they anticipated and know they have a solid foundation to build on that is theirs."

This loan through the county is not county money, but funds

already set aside for economic development, specifically small business development and job creation. The RLF is funded solely from the county's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) which includes principal and interest payments from loans and interest earned on unspent RLF money.

Repayment of the RLF would come from the proposed \$500,000 appropriated to the

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Fish House in House Bill 1128. Without those funds, OWWA is prepared to begin paying off the RLF in six months with a ten-year monthly payment.

OWWA believes the success of the past year proves that the fish house can sustain itself. The fish house has been in the public eye since the very beginning of the "Save the Fish House" project. It has been featured in several news articles with the Raleigh News and Observer and The Virginian-Pilot, and has made its way across the Internet in several blogs, NC Public Radio, and a feature with The Carolina Traveler on wcnc.com.

"With every article that appears, the fish house is flooded with supporters, well wishers, donors, people sending in fishing stories from their past, film makers offering their services, children sending artwork and more," said Payne. "It really touches a heartstring, this reidentifying with American roots."

OWWA is working on lots of upcoming projects. A new website, www.ocracokeseafood.com will focus on the retail of the Ocracoke Seafood Company. It will show what is in season, photos, information and a link to OWWA's website, a calendar of events including fish fries.

In an effort to comply with regulations for the state's hazard analysis and critical control point (HACCP) program, OWWA has put together a HACCP training program for the fishermen.

"In March we asked Prof. David Green, of NCSU Marine Sciences and Technology, if they would consider coming to Ocracoke to offer HACCP certification to all of the fishermen, clammers, crabbers who were interested," stated Robin Payne. "The cost of the class plus being off the island for three days just doesn't work"

OWWA will cover the costs. The class will take place in Ocracoke in December 2007 and will save fishermen the trip to Morehead City and a fee of \$150. It consists of twenty classroom hours. All seafood processing companies must operate within the rules and regulations under this program as mandated by the USFDA. It requires strict regulations to determine significant food safety hazards, implement sanitation standard operating procedures, and monitor water safety, condition of food contact surfaces, protection of food from contamination, proper labeling and storage, etc. In addition to the many permits and licenses a seafood facility must carry, Ocracoke Seafood must also register with the FDA's new Food Bioterrorism Regulation - Protecting Food Supply. "We learned that this past winter when selling wholesale, the buyer asked for our bioterrorism permit number". Seafood buyers need to be legally informed about the fish's origin. Ocracoke Seafood has to confirm in the registry that it only handles seafood from local waters and not imports.

In the next two weeks, Barry Nash, representative from Sea Grant, will come to help the business develop its Ocracoke Fresh campaign - the promotion of local seafood in retail products, general awareness and hopefully a partnership with local restaurants that serve local seafood. This will provide more recognition to promote the local waters.

Along with fish fries and donation jars, Ocracoke Seafood Company is putting together "Ocracoke Seafood Recipes", a collection of recipes from the locals and old-timers, along with a section for dingbatter recipes. Please call the fish house if you have an old story to tell, recipe to share, or picture to show that could be included.

"We want to have a photo or a story to go along with the reci-

pes," said Payne. "Local favorite recipes are special but when added with a photo and a story, it is more than a cookbook." All proceeds from the sale will go to OWWA.

Without the volunteers and locals coming out for jobs, there would be no fish house. To get this project up and running, many acted from their hearts, without regard to personal finances, other time commitments, and a guarantee that the mission would be a success. With a firm foundation now in place, OWWA looks to establish the Ocracoke Seafood Company and operate on its own. Project leaders are not only looking to maintain the current fish house, but expand its scope to include education opportunities with NCCAT and the local youth, along with research projects including Live Flounder and Oyster Restoration. Employees and volunteers have the opportunity to be living history educators to share the culture and keep it alive children and grandchildren of local fishing families.

The building itself has been there since 1965 and underwent a major expansion in 1976. When the remodeling is complete, the structure will be more sound and will provide fishermen the means to rapidly process the fish. This means being able to spend more time out on the water doing what they do best.

Locals and visitors have a chance to continue to support this project with their donations, purchases in retail, and support at fundraisers. Connie Mason, Maritime Heritage Tourism Officer for Hyde and surrounding counties, wrote "Ocracoke's boundaries and community extends well beyond her permanent residents." By joining in this mission, the Ocracoke community stands up for itself and helps secure a way of life for the future.