

# Fish house tries to stay afloat



CHRIS CURRY | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Ocracoke's last working fish house provides bait for tackle shops and a fish market for restaurants and customers.

*\$500,000 requested from state legislature to pay off county loan*

By Catherine Kozak  
The Virginian-Pilot

### OCRACOKE

Since reopening a year ago, the island's one remaining fish house has provided work for 35 watermen and revitalized a

working waterfront endangered by development.

Its success speaks not only to the practical need for a fish house in a fishing village, but to the wisdom of bringing together an innovative group of watermen to manage it.

"I have rarely ever seen a project that has had such enormous statewide support," said interim Hyde County Manager Carl Classen.

"It has been a project that has captured many people's imagination."

But if Hyde County hadn't stepped in to provide a \$325,000 bridge loan last month so the watermen could buy the business and secure its lease, the fish house would have been right back where it started.

A request for \$500,000 for

See WATERMEN, PAGE 5

“ On Ocracoke, we feel that the fishing industry is directly related to the tourism industry. They advertise it as a fishing village. And it is a fishing village.”

Hardy Plyler, a waterman who served on the waterfront access committee

*Pilot Virginian June 2007*

## WATERMEN | Committee pushes for waterfront trust fund

Continued from Page 1

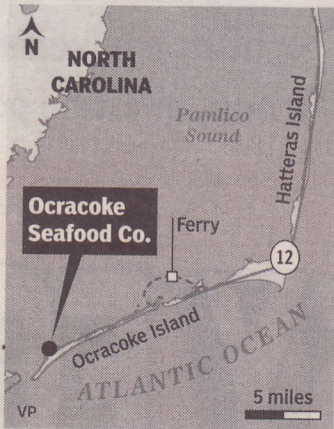
the fish house, including money for renovation, has not been approved so far by the General Assembly.

Classen said the money in the county's revolving fund has to be returned so that the county, one of the poorest in the state, can help other businesses in need.

"They're still in session," he said of the legislature. "They're still working on the budget and we're hopeful."

In the final report issued in April by the state's Waterfront Access Study Committee, one of the many recommendations was that the state establish a waterfront trust fund "to assist in the retention and enhancement of working waterfront land uses."

The study committee was created in response to the widespread losses along North Carolina's coast of fishing piers, docks, marinas, fish houses, boat houses, boat accesses and boat yards, largely due to high land costs



on waterfronts.

Before the watermen banded together last year and established the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association, the fish house was at risk of being sold.

For months, watermen had to go much farther to offload

their catch and had no place to sell their fresh-caught fish.

When it reopened in June 2006, the fish house, renamed Ocracoke Seafood Co., included a fish market for the public.

The watermen's association operates under the nonprofit Ocracoke Foundation, which was incorporated in August. All profits go to the watermen's mission.

"This is a community-based cooperative," said Hardy Plyler, a waterman who served on the waterfront access committee. "It's still a prototype, or a model, for the future to maintain fishing communities."

"This was our last chance. If we had lost this area, there wouldn't be another site where we could access the water from a truck so we could move product."

Plyler said the fish house provides fresh bait for tackle shops, locally caught fish for restaurants and the opportunity for onlookers to watch authentic watermen at work.

"On Ocracoke, we feel that

the fishing industry is directly related to the tourism industry," he said. "They advertise it as a fishing village. And it is a fishing village."

Robin Payne, one of the organizers of the watermen's association, said that in the past year, the fish house has paid \$300,337 to local clambers, crabbers, oystermen and watermen, plus \$42,000 in labor. Three more part-time staffers were hired from the community.

In light of the findings of the study committee, Payne said she hopes the state sees the value in investing in a venture that preserves livelihoods as well as the character and heritage of the coast.

"This is really not about a small town who wants to keep a fish house," she said. "People come here with cameras to take pictures of the birds and the fishermen. People are identifying with the roots of a way of life."

Catherine Kozak, (252) 441-1711, cate.kozak@pilotonline.com