



Time to get our fleet in order – BEFORE DREAMING

BY KEITH INGRAM, PUBLISHER

To say it has been an interesting year would be a bit of an understatement. In last year's *Workboat Review* I suggested that every cloud has a silver lining and for some it did. Sadly, for many, the offering of a silk purse turned into a pigs ear. Yes, it would be fair to say the maritime industry fell on tough times this past year and for many, the light at the end of the tunnel remains but a dim glimmer of hope. Meanwhile, others are positive and experiencing a lift in business. Why is this one could ask? And you the reader should ask, without fear or favour, as most of our readers are committed to the maritime industry in which we live and work.

I know the Boating Industry Association has been talking up a storm when it comes to the leisure marine market with the future establishment of a super yacht service base at Hobsonville, on the upper reaches of the Waitemata Harbour. The proposed plans are grandiose to say the least, with even the Waitakeri City Council talking luxury apartments surrounding a large marine heavy industry complex. Now there's an oxymoron if ever I heard one. High valued luxury apartments surrounding a heavy marine industry facility, what's wrong with these fella's. Have they not learnt from the lessons of the Devonport Naval Base or even Viaduct Harbour where the NIMBY syndrome kicked in after the novelty wore off. Ports of Auckland could also share a lesson or two from their experiences of now having hundreds of apartments surrounding the Port on what was once industrial or railway land.

I do not wish to pour water on the enthusiasm of these promoters, but I would suggest that from past experiences not every cloud bares a silver lining.

While the focus remains on the dream of rich wonders, I notice that the forward order books of our major super yacht construction and repair companies remain somewhat uncertain with many empty sheds. It's a sign of the times. A sign the dreams are not about to change in the near future.

Unfortunately, another sign is that while many of our industry leaders continue to keep their heads in the clouds they are losing sight of what is really happening on the waterfront. The cost of waterfront positions, when competing with apartments, is killing our industry. Our once proud service and boat repair facilities are being decimated and only a shadow of its former self has survived. The money today, tomorrow and even next year will be in servicing our existing fleet and yet we are failing in the most fundamental of core business ethos. Our yards

have been moving inshore to affordable industrial land, which is all very well when you are building new boats or long term refits. But sadly, when this work dries up, so does the income. The maritime industry needs water's edge facilities to service and turn our vessels around quickly. Not cranes and trucks and special permits to just get to the repair yard. Just in case some of our industry leaders have forgotten, it is timely to remind them that working boats do not make money tied up or sitting in a shed miles from the water. They cost! And it's this cost that is no longer sustainable on the industry. Sad, but true. I hate to be the bearer of grim news.

When you look around the yards, the number of new boats under construction is much reduced with many yards remaining uncertain about where the next job will come from. And yet there are some who remain optimistic and have a steady stream of work trickling in. Why can this be? Ease of access is a key point. Marketing and promotion to the right areas appears to be a good follow up. While the leisure marine market continues to languish, those who shifted focus, trimmed costs and targeted the commercial industry appear to be doing better than most. So, maybe the lesson our industry fathers should be listening to is to start at home. Concentrate on getting our own fleet in order. Seriously, the average age of our fishing trawler fleet is approaching 30 to 40 years. Fishermen cannot afford to build new vessels because of the low wharf price for fish and what they do earn has to be spent wisely on repairs and refits. Likewise, the charter boat fleet needs ease of access to quality yards to stay on top of their game in an ever-discerning tourist market. The fast passenger ferry and tourist cruise market equally require speedy turnaround times and yards with a wide pool of skilled staff are winning the haul out contracts. Our working boat fleet, while diverse, remains the lifeblood of the industry. So let's nurture it and not bleed it to death while pursuing false dreams.

To finish on a brighter note, even when faced with rougher times our marine industry has still managed to commission a wide range of workboats into the fleet from large to small, so it cannot be all bad.