



# Mimico Cruising Club

— Sails through —

# The Pandemic

By Graham Segger, FCPA, MCC Treasurer and Will O'Hara, LLB, MCC Commodore

**F**or many boating clubs and marinas, the summer of 2020 was one they would rather forget and quickly place in their wake.

Some clubs did not open at all and many boats were stranded on the hard. Just when boaters most needed an escape onto the fair waters of the Great Lakes, they faced a tempest of government regulations that often prevented them from doing so. This is a case study of how one club not only survived, but thrived by carefully navigating the myriad operating rules, regulations and limitations of three levels of government, designed to keep everyone safe.

## ABOUT MCC

Mimico Cruising Club (MCC) is a 306-slip boating club located in a protected harbour in Humber Bay West that it shares with Etobicoke Yacht Club and Humber Bay Sailing Centre. Its landlord is the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority with oversight by the City of Toronto. MCC has floating rather than fixed docks, which are not affected by water levels, and range from 27 to 49 feet. The ratio of sailboats to powerboats is about 60:40. MCC has an experienced full time general manager and supports a restaurant and bar, with limited services in the winter. Ten board members represent a wide array of skills and backgrounds. It's a self-help club (21 hours required, less for seniors) with 23 active standing committees consisting of well over 100 volunteers. There is a very active racing program with Wednesday night races, and some members compete at regattas elsewhere.



## THE PANDEMIC STRIKES

It was shortly after the annual Robbie Burns banquet in January that the pandemic struck. The board and GM quickly realized it would be essential to focus on the evolving pandemic-related rules being proclaimed by various levels of government and respond quickly to each change. Club management and members engaged with contacts at both the administrative and political levels and made commitments to strictly abide by all dictates and also monitor guidance offered by the Ontario Sailing Association.

Launch was initially scheduled for April 25, 2020, traditionally a herculean single-day process involving two huge fixed cranes, two mobile cranes and volunteers from the more than 220 boats to be launched. Crews are normally organized in a military fashion with team leaders, deputies and dozens of specialized functions.

When Ontario declared a state of emergency on March 17 and limited gatherings to 50 people, the board held emergency meetings and haulout-launch committee chair Bruce Pierce, general manager John Pereira and rear commodore Jerry Jackson and their committee quickly devised an alternate plan that reduced the size of the teams and spread the launch over multiple days.

Launch was pushed back and cranes were rebooked, with the hope that launch would be permitted when the date arrived. Then, on March 28, Ontario limited gatherings to five people and on March 30 closed all outdoor recreational facilities. It looked like the chance of a successful launch was slipping away and it was again postponed. The club was chasing a carrot on a stick.

MCC also began a series of contingency planning exercises for its finances. In February the membership committee was evaluating ten new member applicants. Nine of them withdrew their applications when the severity of the pandemic became evident. Financial models were developed based on various revised operating scenarios and non-essential spending was curtailed. One project that had been started in March was a \$90,000 replacement of dock ramps (bridges). This was deemed a critical high-water-related safety initiative and under Ontario commercial operations rules was allowed to continue to completion.

## LAUNCH, RACING AND HAULOUT

The City of Toronto entered Stage 1 of a phased re-opening on May 19, allowing recreational facilities to start up but continued to restrict restaurants to take-out only. The club revised the launch plan and re-booked cranes for two weekends straddling the first

week of June.

A chief medical officer was recruited from within the membership. Dr. Bjug Borgundvaag, an Emergency Medicine doctor at Mount Sinai Hospital, was uniquely qualified to plan protocols to ensure safeguards were implemented and adhered to keep people safe.

This was doubly important this past year. Not only was the club concerned about

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the health of its members, it also recognized the critical need to be seen by the local community to be doing so. There are thousands of condo dwellers who have bird's eye views of the club moorings and grounds and some were quick to make noise when they wrongly perceived that rules were not being adhered to.

Members were allowed into each of the three main yards in pre-scheduled time slots to get their boats ready for launch. Volunteer members were posted at the gate to con-

survey of members, the board decided to proceed with a full launch. Interestingly, many of the members who were initially opposed to launching acknowledged later in the summer that they were delighted the board held firm and splashed all boats. Some were concerned, understandably, of what might happen if the crisis worsened.

Toronto entered Stage 2 on June 24, allowing sports training but no competition.

Some race boats began informal "training sessions" on the lake. This was tricky, since many believe "any two boats on the same course automatically becomes a race and any three a regatta". With Stage 3 opening on July 31, a full racing program began. The club decided to limit crew on each boat to four, down from an average of seven normally. Interestingly, with reopening, new member applications flooded in and by September all slips were filled.

On September 19, when Covid in-



trol access and ensure that only small numbers of symptom-free members entered the yard.

The decision to launch – even in June – was not met with universal support by members. Several felt strongly that they should be allowed to keep their boats on the hard, and requested a formal vote. But the board determined it was not feasible for a selective launch, given the way boats are stored in the yard and launched by cranes. The rear commodore said: "Cherry picking was just too dangerous".

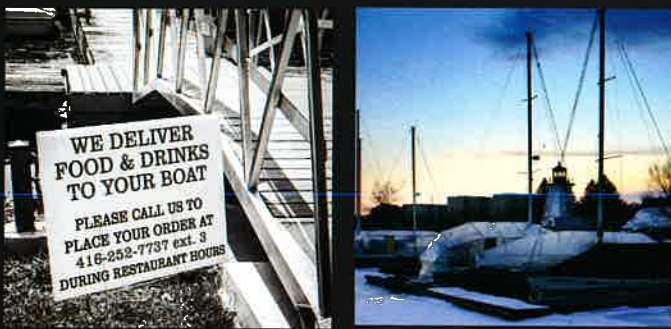
It was decided that an all-or-none approach was required and, after an informal

fections began to trend upward in Ontario and outdoor gatherings were reduced to 25, it was decided, in consultation with the club's chief medical officer, that plans needed to be altered again. Haulout, which had been scheduled for late October, was moved forward two weeks to ensure that all boats would be back on the hard by Thanksgiving. This was done under the supervision of the club's chief medical officer.

## CLUB REVENUES AFFECTED

General Manager & COO John Pereira ably stick-handled his way through

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In years passed, liveaboard sailors have gathered during the winter months at docks near the iconic lighthouse at Mimico Cruising Club, located in Humber Bay in Toronto. Liveaboard sailors set up their boats with framing over the deck during the winter months at various Toronto-area yacht clubs.

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the continually evolving restaurant-bar rules throughout the season. When dining room operations were restricted to take-out only on March 17, he quickly developed partnerships with several of the online food delivery networks. He implemented an aggressive marketing campaign directed to the members, many of whom live locally, encouraging them to support the club food and beverage take-out option.

Once the boats were back in the water, John developed a food-and-drink delivery service to boats, with promotional signs at the head of each dock. This was so popular that it will be maintained in future years, pandemic or not. Later in the summer, when indoor gatherings were expanded to 50 people and 100 outdoors, the club took advantage of the patio expansion provisions in the guidelines to expand the patio onto the lawn, allowing better-than-recommended physical distancing of tables. A representative of each table was recorded with name and contact information to allow contact tracing if required, which fortunately wasn't necessary. Many members enjoyed the feeling of grass on bare feet and want this arrangement maintained.

One unavoidable blow to the club was the loss of most of special-event revenues, such as weddings. This has been a small but important contributor to the club's finances and its loss resulted in a significant reduction in monthly revenue. However, the popularity of club dining partially offset the loss of this revenue and gave members more time in their own club. Food and beverage revenues were also boosted by the closing of the club barbecues at the end of each dock due to local regulations. During the pandemic, the club's gardening committee was busier than ever and the grounds had never looked as great as they did in 2020.

## GOVERNMENT SUBSIDIES HELPED WITH STAFF

MCC was very grateful for the federal Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) program which met its stated objective of keeping employees on the job at the club, despite the significant reduction in club revenues. Without the program, the club would have had to make greater reductions to staff levels and operations. Salaried food and beverage staff who were under-utilized in their normal roles were redeployed during the spring to other tasks.

The board also established an installment payment option for members financially affected by the pandemic which allowed them to pay their summer mooring fees and winter haul out and storage fees over a deferred period.

## MASKS, VISITING BOATS AND SAILPAST

Throughout the summer, a smaller meeting room at the club was closed and the club washrooms were limited to only two individuals at a time. Mask wearing and physical distancing were mandatory when moving through the main clubhouse and on the docks and pathways. Board and committee meetings were held virtually with the club's Zoom account.

MCC opened early to boats from reciprocal clubs and welcomed those committed to following the strict visitor protocol which was implemented. This was done to encourage cruising generally and also to encourage other clubs to reciprocate for MCC members. The approach worked well. Other clubs began to open as the summer progressed and MCC members had a variety of other clubs to visit. Club cruises, often with 10-20 boats visiting reciprocating clubs, were suspended for the most part. However, in keeping with the club's philosophy of making the usual club events happen, even if compromised by the pandemic, a modified commodore's cruise was held around the Toronto Islands. It was wonderful to see a long line of boats fling through the Toronto Harbour with MCC burgees proudly flying.

The club also held a modified sailpast for the same reason – it was a tradition that should be honoured. This past year it was held at the end of the season rather than the beginning and instead of the club boats saluting the commodore anchored in the lake, the

commodore glided up and down the fairways on the race committee boat. As he passed the boats in their slips – colourful pennants flying from their halyards – children lay in wait to blast the commodore with their water guns. Participating members were given a bottle of Prosecco and a box lunch as part of the celebration. This was an important event for maintaining club spirit.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Mimico Cruising Club had some inherent advantages going into the pandemic. It was on a solid financial footing with a relatively full membership with experienced professional management and an engaged volunteer board. It also had committee members with extensive business experience and acumen. Key takeaways from the summer are as follows:

- » Early and diligent focus on the rules imposed by the various levels of government and engagement with the authorities to fully understand all obligations.
- » A haulout-launch chair and committee with creative responses to unprecedented challenges, and a board willing to make tough decisions in a rapidly evolving environment, keeping the club active within government regulations.
- » An experienced general manager and staff, with help for costs by government funding. The club used virtual meeting technology to ensure safety and quick decision-making.
- » An ability to adapt the food and beverage operations to the rapidly evolving regulatory environment and identify new opportunities such as the take-out and dock delivery services and expansion of the outdoor patio
- » Establishment of the new position of chief medical officer from the membership, and a club layout which supported physical distancing.
- » A compassionate approach to financial hardships faced by some members, and a supportive membership offering input but also support for board decisions.
- » Most of all, cooperative members who were aware of their public health obligations and gladly suffered inconveniences to keep their club alive and active.
- » The importance of regular and forthright communications from the board to the members. Board members and the GM sent email blasts at least weekly, supplemented by the club's monthly newsletter, Sheet and Shaft. Members constantly expressed appreciation for these communications during such uncertain times.