

Club, city, civic league still at odds over launch site

In a city brimming with waterways, rowing or crew, is the Rodney Dangerfield of sports. Despite its Olympic status, it is unrecognized by the Virginia High School League and most citizens.

But several Beach high schools have crew clubs, including Cox, First Colonial and Cape Henry Collegiate.

Wimps need not apply. To participate you need the cardiovascular fitness of a cross country skier and the mental fortitude of a marathon runner.

You also need an expensive, skinny boat that can be 66 feet long. And that's where the trouble begins. Finding a place to store and launch these ballistic beauties, called shells, is a nightmare.

In March 2000, representatives from local rowing clubs met with the city at Cox High School and petitioned for a facility from which they can safely launch their boats. Known then as the Virginia



ALAN KECK

The Cox Crew team practices in Dey Cove, just off Broad Bay. Pictured are: John Schreiber, left, Chris Cornwall, Doug Stambaugh, Steyer Rehorn, Kyle Martin, Eric Bonney, John Harrison, Ben Vartabedian and Mark Nells.

Beach Rowing Club, the group is now called the Great Neck Joint Site Committee.

The city seemed eager to help, and began surveying possible launch locations. Any long-term launch site must have room for the clubs' 40-

foot floating dock and a boat storage facility, parking for as many as 80 team members and a channel wide and straight enough for the rowers.

One by one, the sites failed to meet minimum criteria. Munden Point would be per-

fect, except it's so far away that daily practice would be impossible. Using the city's boat ramp next to the Lesner Bridge is impossible due to strong currents in the inlet.

GNJSC chairperson Karen Hollifield said access to the

Lynnhaven River, with its 26 miles of navigable waterways, is the perfect solution. And the best launch site would be Great Neck District Park.

The city disagrees. A site

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analysis paid for by the city shows that water access could be achieved with a 250-foot unpaved path leading to a 100-foot descending boardwalk that leads barely beyond the waterfront's brush and muck. At the end would be the rowing clubs' own 10-by-40 foot floating dock.

Total cost would be \$26,250. Cox Crew Auxiliary president Bob Long said the clubs would work to come up with all of that money, if necessary.

Still, the city says there are unresolved issues, such as water depth, lack of facilities to launch the crew coach's small motorized boat, boat storage area, public or private access and lack of support from the adjacent civic league.

Brian Solis, a planner with Virginia Beach Parks and Rec, said any site the city develops will likely have to serve the public. And water depth is a big issue. To ensure that rowers, canoers and kayakers can always access the city dock during low tide, it would have to stretch 500 to 1,000 feet into the channel.

Hollifield said that is not true. An avid rower with the Virginia Beach Belles, she said canoes and kayaks are flat-bottomed, and draft less than the rowing shells.

Cox crew coach Bill Evans said the water-depth issue has been misinterpreted. Years ago the city asked him how deep the water needed to be for rowing and he said 18 inches. That figure is one of the major issues with Great Neck Park. At low tide, some areas surrounding the park are mud flats.

But crew teams only need



Mark Nells, left, Ben Vartabedian, Eric Bonney, John Harrison, Kyle Martin, Steyer Rehorn, Doug Stambaugh and Chris Cornwall put an eight-man shell into the water from their floating dock in Dey Cove while coxswain John Schreiber and assistant coach Chris Bragg supervise.

the 18 inches to row at full pace. They can launch in considerably less, especially if the bottom is soft silt as at Great Neck. They do it all the time.

Hollifield said the last thing they would do is deliberately tear up the bottom of their shells.

"Our boats, like the (eight-man shells) cost \$20,000 each. Why would we put our equipment in jeopardy?" she said.

Hollifield said the rowing clubs can deal with almost every issue the city has with the Great Neck site. She and Evans insist that if the city follows the original site plan, there will be plenty of water for the crew teams.

If the city won't allow the coach's small 9.5 horsepower motorboat to launch at Great Neck, she said the club will find other means to get the boat out there. If the park can't accommodate the club's

need for parking, Hollifield said Cox Principal Brian Matney has given permission to use school property. GNJSC is also exploring options for boat storage on Cox property, which is adjacent to the park.

What they can't seem to overcome is civic league opposition. The Shorehaven Civic League, which borders Great Neck District Park on the north and south, has submitted a petition opposing the plan. It is signed by 98 percent of the approximately 150 homeowners.

Civic league president Ted Gardner said it has nothing to do with the kids.

"Good God no," he said. "There is no opposition to the kids or their cause. There is nothing any more beautiful than rowing."

But he is equally adamant that the site won't work. He lives on that water and he sees

the low tides regularly turn the waterfront into a morass of mud.

"They don't live on the water and they don't see it when the water isn't deep enough," he said. "They're kidding themselves if they think they can go out there anytime and drop their shells and row away. It is not a solution to what they want."

Gardner believes that if the city develops the site with a minimal footprint and it doesn't work as planned, there will be a strong lobbying effort to dredge the area and/or build a 500- to 1,000-foot pier into the main channel. Anything that threatens the unique beauty of this area gets an impassioned response from Gardner.

"You can't try it and leave without damaging that park," he said. "And we do not want dredging in that park."

Lynnhaven Councilman Jim Wood has been keeping up with the debate. While he supports the efforts of the crew clubs, he can't endorse the Great Neck Park site when city planners say it won't work.

"The city has had studies done that say the water depth is not sufficient," he said. "I still think it needs to be evaluated."

Wood and Solis say that the ball is in GNJSC's court. If they can demonstrate that the water depth is adequate and work around the other problems, the city will listen.

Hollifield said she has a petition signed by more than 1,000 residents supporting the Great Neck site and letters of recommendation from neighborhoods they've used in the past. She also has her own water survey that shows the area is suitable for the crew teams and will present them to Wood and the city.

No one argues that the crew teams have been good stewards wherever they've launched. Even Gardner said he would donate to their cause if they find the right spot.

In the meantime, Cox stores their boats and rows out of property owned by Chet and Barbara Ehrenzeller in Broad Bay Point Greens. Evans said the team has been blessed by the Ehrenzeller's generosity, but doesn't expect it will last forever.

The kids are visibly frustrated and Evans is worn down after nine years of gypsy rowing. Still, surrender isn't an option. As long as there's water, he'll keep the kids rowing, somehow.

"We make do because we have to," he said.

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