

Sailors Rally to Support Mt. Pleasant Sailing Center

By William J. Hamilton, III
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MOUNT PLEASANT, S.C. - The Wando High School junior varsity sailing team rigs its boats on the worn Community Sailing dock in the Ashley Marina. It is 58 degrees and the gray sky is dropping thin, chilly mist on their foul weather gear.

The parents have made the trip across Charleston to this dock, tucked in a remote and silting corner of the marina, under the shadow of the James Island Bridge. Because of the necessity of stretching a fleet of 12 boats to serve a dozen high school sailing teams, Sunday afternoon was the only time left for Wando's JV sailors.



Photo by William J. Hamilton, III

The five young sailors on the dock are all that's left of the 16 who signed up to sail in September. This crew has been weeded out by cost, time and the burden of sailing on a highly restricted schedule. Those who are left now, sailing in January, are the tough ones.

The worn practice sails shoot up the masts of the Olympic 420s. They tighten the halyards and slip the low, wet boats into the cold saltwater. In an instant, they're onboard sweeping around the end of the dock, dodging the crowded slips and bridge supports, carving the river with the boat's big rudder. There is a fast current dropping down the Ashley, but these boats are faster. They clear the dock with the swift eagerness of youth.

Until late January, Mt. Pleasant residents had been promised that they would soon be able to see this scene at the end of the pier at the town's new \$14 million, 22-acre waterfront park. A community sailing facility would have opened sailing to dozens more of East Cooper's youth. The time available to practice would have increased. The community could have seen something to cheer the hearts in these young people on their fast little boats. This facility would have served not only Wando, but sailors from the many other local high schools who live in Mt. Pleasant, the hotbed of Lowcountry youth sailing, as well as the community at large.

This promise was made and elaborated upon with colorful illustrations and endless reassurances after a massive show of force by supporters of the sailing center shortly before the last town election. The local sailing community congratulated itself on being heard by its political representatives and cheerfully re-elected them. The mayor and town administrator were clearly hostile to the idea, as were several members of council.

However, we believed democracy had worked.

The \"official reason\" the sailing center is now being relocated, delayed or eliminated is that the current is too fast under the bridge. It is claimed the kids can't sail around the bridge supports. They say the waves in the harbor are too big. I have sailed our harbor since I was 12 years old. I'm now 48. These statements simply aren't true.

The presence of small boats skippered by children is problematic for the commercial shipping industry in Charleston. While the motorized chase boats will ensure the kids are towed out of the way of oncoming ship traffic, Mom and Dad are certain to complain to elected officials when the afternoon sailing session they paid for is largely spent tied up to the dock waiting for the big ships full of Chinese imports to pass. The situation could get worse: The Charleston maritime industry wants to build another big container terminal in North Charleston where it is unpopular, not in remote Jasper County which is desperate for the jobs and has room to spare.

Today our kids sail under the careful and expensive supervision of trained adults who protect them using motorized chase boats. The carefree summer sailing days on the Wando River that I enjoyed as a child do not belong to our children. The heavy ship traffic makes the once beautiful Wando River too dangerous for children to sail unsupervised. The days when Mt. Pleasant routinely produced some of the Southeast's best sailors are gone. Time on the water is now expensive and limited. When I was a child it was free and lasted all day. The promise that shipping traffic wouldn't disrupt our use of the Wando river made 30 years ago was as dishonest as the promise two years ago that we would have a sailing center.

I have promised the young sailors of Mt. Pleasant to take this struggle to the people of their community. I have promised, if they will sail in the bitter cold, to challenge the power of the State Ports Authority and its friends. My son and his fellow sailors on our little team deserve that much. My father gave me a beautiful Wando River to sail on. I owe his namesake grandson, and the grandchildren of his friends, as much of what our parents gave us as we can give their grandchildren.

If you would like to see your child sail with their high school's team, contact the wonderful people at Charleston Community Sailing. Thank the men and women who did so much to make that small dock and fleet on the Ashley River available to our children. They have not asked me to write this or seen what I have written. I do not speak for them.

To join me in my efforts to build a program on the Mt. Pleasant shoreline, visit the Against The Wind webpage and sign up for our e-mail updates. If you believe our children deserve more than broken promises and we deserve more than broken, compromised government, I'll be at O'Brien's pub on I On Square at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 6, to plan a response. I promise nothing but a fight - a promise we can keep.

EDITOR'S NOTE: William Hamilton is an attorney who lives in I On Village.