

Art McGinnis looks back on the sale of the Marina to Klaus Fuerniss Enterprises

“There were dark clouds, but it’s been a wonderful 32 years”

(By Margot Grant)

He built the Arena, the Driftwood Inn and the Royal Terraces in Sechelt, Port Stalashen in Wilson Creek, and Marina Place and Georgia Mirage in Gibsons. But of all his projects over the years, Art McGinnis (85) liked Gibsons Marina best.

For over thirty years, he managed the marina. He was, he says modestly, “just one of the shareholders of Gibsons Marina Hotel Ltd.” (GMHI). He actually started the company.

Though GMHI has sold the business to Klaus Fuerniss Enterprises (KFE), McGinnis still wears a red and white “Gibsons Marina” ballcap. But since handing over the keys to Klaus Fuerniss on May 15, he has not been back to Gibsons harbour.

There had been plans for a marina in Gibsons since the 1960s. In 1983, after the federal government dredged the harbour and built the breakwater, GMHI won the bid to build a marina. Lower Gibsons was in dire need of more visitors and more business. The feeling was that a big hotel would help. GMHI was going to build it.

But the hotel never got off the ground. “We had a great plan for a 80-room hotel, but the time was not right,” he says.

How high was the hotel going to be? McGinnis smiles. “At least four storeys.” There was no noticeable opposition, he says. “We even drilled test holes for the aquifer. It was all quite similar. Except I had no plans for condo’s.”

When it was clear the hotel was not going to be, he filed the plans and concentrated on the marina. The first seven years, it lost money. But he felt the marina was a good thing for the town. Eventually, it became a good business, although the store never made any money. “It was a service, it brought people in,” he says.

Under the terms of the lease, GMHI was allowed to raise the rates by 15 per cent a year. “But we never raised them more than 6 per cent at any time, and there were years when the rates remained the same. We just raised them by need.”

Quite a few people had small boats at the marina, he says. “When you increase the rates substantially you probably lose a number of these small boat owners. So in the end, as a marina, you are no better off. I always thought the marina should be for families with smaller boats, too.”

Every year, the marina had to pay the Town of Gibsons for the lease. In 2011, the year before the lease was up for renewal, the marina paid \$74,777 plus property tax for 377 slips. The town wanted more and asked real estate appraisers D.R. Coell and Associates to conduct a market rental valuation. The firm concluded that from 2012-2017, the rental fee should be \$199,825 per year.

“A useless valuation,” McGinnis scoffs. “They compared Gibsons Marina with real estate in Victoria.” The matter went to arbitration and GMHI won.

But there were dark clouds, he says. Shoal Bay Properties, a company owning six lots along 300 ft. of waterfront between the proposed George Hotel site and Gibsons Marina, claimed access along all points of the foreshore of their property to deep water at any time, including low tide. They claimed all the water between the waterfront and the breakwater, seriously hampering the marina. There was talk of the marina losing 45 to 60 slips, rendering the operation unprofitable. Shoal Bay Properties threatened to take GMHI, the town and the province to court over the riparian rights.

“The marina was not for sale, definitely not,” McGinnis said. However, Klaus Fuerniss Enterprises wanted to buy it, and after “many sleepless nights”, McGinnis decided it was better to sell than risk losing the business altogether. “There really wasn’t any other option.”

“Of course it was good for us. But it was not only about me. After the sale, KFE, with the water in front of the George Hotel, could give Shoal Bay Properties a channel to their waterfront. This would make the harbour more functional. I think it is good for Gibsons. And I like the hotel.”

Shoal Bay Properties has filed a lawsuit. According to the plaintiff, the plans to redesign the marina for the George hotel will further restrict the navigable deep-water access to and from the Shoal Bay Properties. The company has taken legal action against the Town of Gibsons, the Ministry of Forest Land and Natural Resources, Marina Hotel Holdings Ltd, the province of British Columbia, and GMHI.

“Yes, our law office has been served, but I’m not the least bit worried,” McGinnis says. “With the sale, Klaus Fuerniss Enterprises agreed to take over all liabilities. I wish Shoal Bay Properties good luck.”

When he sold the marina, there was a verbal agreement that the new owner would pay the employees the same wages, McGinnis says. However, he payed for extended medical coverage, and the new owner did not. “The employees retired, or chose not to work for the new owner,” McGinnis says.

Several workers who were contacted declined to comment.

Looking back on his long years at Gibsons marina, McGinnis is quite happy. “It’s been a great 32 years. I really enjoyed the marina, people were wonderful.”