

New boathouse expands access to waterfront

By Ellen Neuborne
Free Press Staff Writer

The Burlington Community Boathouse officially lowered the gangway Saturday, inviting the city to come aboard.

More than 600 visitors turned out to amble along the dock, enjoy the free sailboat rides and admire the spacious architecture of what used to be a Louisiana oil barge.

"I'm pleased that this is available to us. It's really a special thing," said Carole Ann Greig of Essex. "It's beautiful architecture. I keep wondering, 'Where's the catch, when do I have to pay?'"

The boathouse is free and open to the public daily from 1 p.m. to 10 p.m. Its construction was funded by a \$2.9 million bond voted in March 1987 for waterfront improvements. The construction on the \$1 million boathouse project began eight weeks ago and finished just in time for this weekend's opening.

Visitors at the Saturday open house not only toured the two-story boathouse, they visited the waterfront park, strolled along the crushed stone walkways or the

Turn to BOATHOUSE, back page



ROB SWANSON, Free Press

LAUNCHING PARTY: More than 600 people helped launch the Community Boathouse Saturday.

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From page 1A

6,000-square-foot wooden pier, or just sat on the stone wall and admired the view.

The boathouse itself recalls the design of the Lake Champlain Yacht Club, built in 1887 at the same location at the foot of College Street. Boathouse architect Marcel Beaudin said he wanted to recreate some of the history of Lake Champlain in the project. The new boathouse has the spaciousness of the old yacht club, as well as the post and beam architecture. But Bill Kimball, a lifetime resident of Burlington, said he remembers the old club looking quite different.

"This is bigger, and much more modern," Kimball said. "Back in those days, you wouldn't have seen all these things going on down here."

Some of the new goings-on are the sailing and diving opportunities at the boathouse. Sailworks is offering boat rentals with special discounts for Burlington residents. For rent are rowboats, rowing shells, and two types of sailboats, Laser and Rhodes 19'. Rates range from \$5 per hour for a rowboat to \$120 for a day on a Rhodes 19'. Every Thursday evening is Demo Night when 20-minute rides are free for Burlington residents and \$1 for others. There are also lower weekday rates.

Sailworks also offers sailing lessons for everyone from beginners to a refresher course. Private lessons are also available.

McKibbin Sailing Vacations offers a slightly more luxurious sailing experience. Three-hour cruises leave at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. daily and sunset cruises can be arranged. Three-hour trips run \$30 per person. Whole-day captained cruises are also available, \$375 for a sailboat, \$500 to \$800 for a power yacht, or experienced boaters may charter one of the sailing or power yachts for three days to one week.

Waterfront Diving Center offers scuba rental and lessons.

There are opportunities for those who wish to enjoy the waterfront from dry land. New England Bicycle Tours has rentals available at \$16 a day. Another shore activity is found at Hulapoppers, a snack bar run by the Daily Planet restaurant.

Boathouse General Manager Nick Warner said he sees the boathouse as a

community resource. "The whole concept is to get people who may not have other opportunities to get out on the waterfront and enjoy it," he said.

"This open deck is the city's new south porch," said Mike Monte, assistant director for Community Development, as he walked along the boathouse's upper deck.

Mayor Bernard Sanders was on hand to enjoy the opening. "The opening of the Burlington Community Boathouse fulfills the dream that many people in the city have had for years, that the Burlington waterfront should be enjoyed by people of all economic levels, not just the wealthy," Sanders said. "I expect that many thousands of people will enjoy it and it helps fulfill the goal of creating a people-oriented downtown waterfront."

In addition to the outdoor activities, Warner said the inside, particularly the Function Room upstairs, will be used for educational and historical purposes.

Church Street Center classes can be held there as well as local business meetings, Warner said. "We're also approaching local hotels to see if we can handle some of their business convention spillover."

Warner said he is working with the Basin Harbor Maritime Museum for exhibits in the Function Room. Already, the boathouse has on display several sepia-toned photographs of the Burlington waterfront during the 1800s.

Entertainment is also part of the new boathouse agenda. Warner said a Thursday Jazz Night and a Wednesday Folk Music Night are being planned and one of Saturday's visitors suggested the Function Room would be a perfect place for a square dance.

Warner said some people have already asked to rent the boathouse for wedding receptions, and while this is possible, Warner said it is not the building's primary function. "We'll book them, but we really want the place to have more of a community thrust," he said.

The boathouse will support itself through rents paid by the vendors and by the rental of the Function Room, Warner said.

It will be open year-round, and Monte said planned winter sports include ice skating, cross-country skiing and possibly ice fishing.