

Dredging may open way for Bennetts

Creek's future 7-20-97

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SUFFOLK — It takes about two years to build each \$2 million-plus Hines-Farley luxury boat.

It is an extended family business with 30 workers, a baby, two dogs and a cat. They build 63-foot boats

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Sonny Hines
Boat-maker's
founder

which cause water sport aficionados much lust, and have office banter such as: "Mom, Jackie at Volvo is on line one."

On Thursday morning, founder Sonny Hines, a ruddy 60-year-old, learned his company has a better future.

This city on Wednesday said it intends to regularly dredge a troublesome sand bar that clogs boating lanes between Bennetts Creek and the Nansemond River.

Hines-Farley Offshore Yachts Inc. is on the creek's western shore. Lacking a six-foot deep channel,

Dredging: Project to help businesses endure

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their boats can't get out of the creek and to the customer.

It seemed to workers that every Suffolk politician visited the plant in the years Hines-Farley has been pushing for regular dredging.

"It's been a nightmare," said plant worker Marc B. Phillips, who is married and has two daughters. "It was like a guillotine was hanging over our head."

With regular dredging, there is hope for the company.

"It means our business," Hines said.

"It means our life. You can't build boats the size we're building in a land-locked area."

Phillips added, "What's the point of building them if you can't get them out?"

Bennetts Creek curls northwest from Glen Forest, and widens as it reaches the Nansemond River. The creek is bordered by sometimes marsh-covered farmland, a plant nursery and mostly residential properties. Future development along the water will be mostly residential. There is a city park with a boating ramp and a marina across the creek and north from Hines-Farley.

The sand bar was last dredged in 1992. It wasn't supposed to be dredged again until 2000.

But boaters can already see the silt gathering at the sore spot, by the eastern lip where the creek meets the Nansemond, and low-tide navigation is again becoming difficult.

The dredging should happen every few years, as the channel begins to fill.

The Army Corps of Engineers, according to preliminary sketches behind the resolution City Council voted on last week, will pay for about 60 percent of the dredging; the city will pay 40 percent.

It would have cost about \$225,000 for the next dredging, according to Tom O'Grady, director of economic development for Suffolk. More regular dredging, since they will in effect clear away less sand, will be cheaper in the long run.

Homeowners will have a clear, navigable waterway in their backyard. Boaters will have access to nearby waters from the creek.

Henry Weaver will be able to fish.

Weaver, 52, often travels from his home in Gates County to Bennetts Creek Park to use the public boating ramp. His 18-foot fishing boat with an 85-horsepower motor didn't cost \$2 million, but it does the job. At the ramp, he lowers it into creek shallows as gray "sand flea" crabs scoot side to side on the



Sonny Hines of Hines-Farley said the city's decision to share the dredging with the Army Corps of Engineers "means our business. It means our life. You can't build boats the size we're building in a land-locked area."

RICHARD L. DUNSTON
The Virginian-Pilot



concrete.

A stone's throw across the creek, reeds jut from the water like green porcupine quills.

Weaver comes to the park because it is beautiful. It is also a good launching point from which to find the Nansemond and James rivers and the Chesapeake Bay. But it's shallow, too.

"Yeah, it could be dredged, all right," Weaver said. "It gets right shallow in there. Especially at low tide. It needs to be deeper out there."

Weaver got his fishing "from my daddy. My daddy loved fishing. When he'd go, we'd all holler, 'I want to go, I want to go.'"

Now he brings his boys with him from time to time.

"Sometimes I bring my girls with me, too."

The good thing about visitors is that they usually come to town with their wallets, and many creek residents believe the waterway that laps at their property has never been marketed well by the growing city.

"You can't let a waterway that goes to the ocean fill in," said Linda Frazier, who owns the Bennetts Creek Marina and Restaurant with her husband.

A clear waterway won't hurt property values, she said. She and her husband don't fear for the eatery's future without the dredging, but the marina would probably close.

Frazier recalled the way the creek used to be, when no big boats could get in unless they timed their trip to high tide.

If the dredging comes through, boaters will be able to tie up long-term or coast in for Wednesday night's all-you-can-eat shrimp dinner and sail out.

"It will help everything here," she said.

Sonny Hines believes this should have happened a long time ago. He said the city assured him that the waterway would be clear when he brought tax revenue and dozens of

jobs to Suffolk. That didn't quite happen as advertised, but he feels the current course of action comes better late than never.

"Without the creek being dredged we'd either be out of business or have to relocate out of the city of Suffolk," Hines said. "There wasn't any way we could make long-range plans."

There is a future now along the banks of Bennetts Creek for \$2 million boats that can hit 50 mph, he said, and Suffolk should be glad.

"We supply jobs here," Hines said.

