

Business

inside

Not letting up: High-rise foes plan to stay highly vocal. D5

HOUSTON CHRONICLE | CHRON.COM | Sunday, April 29, 2012 | Section D ***



Melissa Phillip / HoustonChronicle

Darryl Moore, owner of Darryl Moore's Marine in Spring, says business is improving but still hasn't fully come back from the recession. Before the downturn, he said, his dealership carried 40-foot runabouts but now stocks nothing larger than 27 feet.

Rising tide buoys sellers of boats

After weathering the recession and a severe drought, local dealers start to see a swell in business

By David Kaplan

Houston police Officer Mike Trautwein has a wife and two kids, and their life is always “go-go-go” — except when they can get away on his 26-foot fishing boat.

Setting out from Freeport, they cruise into the Gulf of Mexico until they no longer see land.

HC

“It’s just you, your boat and Mother Nature out there,” Trautwein said. “It clears the mind.”

A passion for boating runs deep in America. About a third of all U.S. adults go boating each year, according to the National Marine Manufacturers Association.

But like many industries, boating was hit hard by the recession, and Houston was hit

Section F

► **Fishing Texas and the Gulf Coast:** Hot spots, gear and tips for success on the water. **Section F**

even harder after last summer’s drought dropped lake water levels to record lows.

Today, though, boating is on the rebound, nationally and locally.

“If the economy is good and water levels are good, that’s when we flourish,” said Darryl Moore, owner of Darryl Moore’s Marine, a high-end boat dealer in Spring.

“Last year, when water levels were down like they were at Lake Conroe, I’d never seen it in my 21 years in business,” he said. But business is improving, he said. “I feel like it’s going to be a

Boat continues on D4



Thomas B. Shea

Robert Guillory strings a reel at the West Marine store in Kemah. The location is part of a 310-store national chain.

CRUDE SUPPLY

U.S. awash in oil, but global demand is what drives prices

By Eric Nalder

At midnight on April 11, a 940-foot tanker maneuvered into the dock at the oil terminal in Valdez, Alaska, carrying an unusual cargo for a returning ship.

Sloshing in its tanks were more than 12 million gallons of Alaskan crude, at least a quar-

ter of the cargo the ship had carried away from Valdez two weeks earlier.

The Alaskan Explorer had sailed to a Washington refinery but was forced to return to Alaska with 300,000 barrels because the onshore storage tanks were too full to accept it, confirmed Anil Mathur, CEO of

the Alaska Tanker Co., which owns the ship.

“Not the normal course of business,” said John Kotula, one of the few outsiders privy to the incident because of his position as manager of the state of Alaska’s environmental office in Valdez.

The tanker’s inability to

offload its oil underlines a startling reality: Stocks of crude oil in the U.S. have been for the last two years at historic highs, while Americans are using decreasing amounts of its most important product — gasoline.

But federal statistics show another recent development: West Coast refineries are decreasing

their production as the domestic demand for gasoline shrinks.

“If there is so much crude oil around, why is the price of gasoline so high? Why is the price of heating oil so high?” asked Dan Lawn, an environmental consultant who was in the same job as Kotula for decades before

Oil continues on D4

FROM THE COVER

Boat sales chart course to recovery

Boat from page D1

decent year."

At the 67-year-old Gibbs boat store in Montrose, store manager Marie Brocato agreed that sales are starting to pick up.

Ellen Hopkins, spokeswoman for the marine manufacturers group, said new boat sales improved by 5 percent in 2011, the first uptick since the recession. First-time buyers are fueling the recovery, she said.

The recently expanded West Marine, a boating-supply store in Kemah, speaks to the growing strength locally. The 25,000-square-foot store is the only Texas flagship for the 310-store national chain.

Along with fishing gear, the store at 1401 Marina Bay Drive has a sailboat rigging shop, engine parts service counter, and a 6,000-square-foot apparel department. It carries such items as shirts designed to repel bugs and others to resist stains from fish blood and guts.

The store's electronics department illustrates how the boating world has made advances in high-tech devices such as touch-screen navigation systems and multiple function units that provide chart plotting, radar and fish-finding technology.

Better times help

As the economy improves, people are willing to invest in such equipment, said Erik Rimblas, West Marine's regional vice president.

"Houston has been a really good market for us for a long time," he said.

Stores such as Academy Sports + Outdoors and Bass Pro Shops also offer a wide selection of fishing and other boating-related gear.

Local boat dealers offer an array of vessels, from dinghies to fancy pleasure boats. They sell pontoons, sailboats, small and big fishing boats, water-sport boats, cabin cruisers and personal watercraft, for example.

Moore's business still hasn't fully recovered

Boat facts

▶ Recreational boating generated over \$30 billion in sales and service in 2010 (most recent data)

▶ Texas ranked No. 2 in the U.S. for sales of power boats, engines, trailers and accessories, totaling more than \$812 million. Florida ranked first at \$1.1 billion.

▶ Boating is primarily a middle-class sport, with 83 percent of boat owners having a household income of less than \$100,000 and 62 percent earning less than \$75,000.

▶ Ninety-two percent of the boats sold nationally are made in the U.S.

▶ More than 97 percent of boat builders are small businesses.

Source: National Marine Manufacturers Association

from the recession, he said. Before the economic downturn, he carried 40-foot runabouts, but he said he now stocks nothing larger than 27 feet.

His high-end water-sport boats made by Malibu and Axis range in price from \$45,000 to \$95,000 and can be used to pull riders of wakeboards and surfboards. A former professional water skier from Australia, Moore noted that water skiing is on the wane compared with wake and surfboarding with boats.

Other local boat dealers carry a wide offering of both fishing and pleasure boats.

Rinker's Boat World in northwest Houston has deep family roots in the industry. The dealership was founded in 1978 by Kit and Jerry Rinker, whose father began making boats in Indiana in 1945.

Rinker's still carries Rinker-made boats, although the manufacturer is now under new ownership.

Jerry Rinker works with his son, Chris Rinker, and their store is focused on runabouts, ski boats, bay boats and pontoon boats. About 60 percent of their boats are for freshwater outlets, particularly lakes, and the rest are for saltwater,



Thomas B. Shea photos

Fishing boat captain Tim Bradbeer, with Beach and Bay Charters, checks out Super Spook artificial bait at the West Marine store in Kemah.



An assortment of outboard motors and kayaks on display at the West Marine store in Kemah.

for hunting and fishing, he said.

Hoping it was a fluke
Chris Rinker said he hopes last summer's severely hot, dry weather was a fluke.

"It's been pretty tough for a lot of dealers, but we've been real fortunate," said Rinker, who recently expanded the store.

Among the boats gaining in popularity nationally are pontoons and smaller aluminum fishing boats, Hopkins said.

Higher fuel prices are not a big issue in the boating world, she said.

"When you got out on the water, you turn off your engine," she explained.

Fishing boat captain Tim Bradbeer, who said he fished before he learned to walk, was at West Marine Kemah recently picking up equipment for his boat.

A store the size of the expanded West Marine with so many offerings is long overdue in the area, Bradbeer said.

The store has doubled in size.

California-based West Marine has stores near The Woodlands, near Spring Branch and in Seabrook and Galveston in addition to its Kemah flagship. For the employees there, store manager Nolan Vander-Haagen said, boating is more than a job.

All 35 store associates own boats or live on them, he said.

Chris Rinker said. His family helped pioneer the selling of high-performance

pontoon boats, he said. Boat dealers such as Rinker's and Darryl Moore's are more focused

on higher-end boats. Small mom-and-pops are more likely to carry inexpensive john boats

david.kaplan@chron.com