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Thunder Alley evolving to stay afloat

While most boating manufacturers have left Thunder Alley, boats will still be present as condominiums incorporate marina slips for residents.

By Anthony Navas

Lisa Knapp used to smell the foul scent of fiberglass as she walked her dog past boat manufacturers in the Thunder Alley on Northeast 188th Street.

She would watch the workers spray paint new vessels and described it as witnessing a birth.

"It was always very exciting," Knapp said.

Knapp, associate editor for International Yachtsman and Wave Magazine, moved to Aventura near Thunder Alley with her husband Kevin in 1998 for two reasons: the water and the boats.

Now when Knapp walks her dog through Thunder Alley, she only sees condos and a few marina slips. A commercial marina, Hi-Lift, and a boat manufacturer, Magnum Marine, remain after the city rezoned the area in 2002 for residential use.

"It's really hypocritical that we've lost them in Aventura when the city has a boat on its flag," Knapp said.

Boats aren't completely absent from the landscape. Hi-Lift is getting a makeover to not only accommodate more boats, but also cater to actual boaters. And many new

condominiums will have marina slips where residents can keep their toys, contributing to the feel that when there's water access nearby there should be boats.

ArTech, a condominium expected to be finished next spring, will be shaped like a cruise ship and will include 43 boat slips, accommodating up to 100-foot vessels. The Atrium, completed last month, is a condominium of 192 units with 22 boat slips. And Uptown Marina Lofts, with 29 marina slips, was completed last year.

But the biggest story on the famed Thunder Boat row is Hi-Lift Marina, as it will soon be transformed into a larger storage facility called Vertical Yacht Club Thunder Alley that will not only be hurricane resistant but also include a lounge, cafe and spa. The current 55-foot building storing boats will be torn down in December to be replaced by a new one that will reach up to 90 feet.

The decision to add a lounge and other features was to appeal to the mind-set of boaters who are looking to relax after sailing their vessels, according to Andrew Sturner, CEO

of **Aqua Marine Partners**, which owns Hi-Lift Marina.

"You have to think of it from the lifestyle of the boater," Sturner said. The change will keep up with the new trends in boats, which are larger than they were in the past, Sturner said.

Companies such as TNT Custom Marine, Cigarette Racing Team and other companies made Thunder Alley their home in the 1960s and 1970s, building vessels and testing them on the bay.

And the boats weren't just for fun.

U.S. Customs pursued drug traffickers in the 1980s with high-speed boats made by Cigarette and Magnum Marine.

Kevin Knapp, Lisa's husband and a licensed captain, remembers hearing the boats roar across the water from his condominium.

"The windows used to vibrate when they came by," Knapp said.

But when it came time for a change, officials such as Jay Beskin and Jeffrey Perlow argued over whether to keep the industry in Aventura.

Beskin, who served on the commission from 1996-05, wanted to maintain the industrial area because he said it was important to Aventura not only for its allure but it would also help the city's economy.

But some didn't like the look of the industrialized Thunder Alley, Beskin said.

"What was continually hammered was that it was unsightly to the city," Beskin said.

The city had zoned the area for residential, commercial and industrial

use in 1999. With the development of the charter school and the designation of a town center at Loehmann's Plaza, officials decided it was better to have condominiums instead of factories on Northeast 188th Street.

Perlow, who served on the commission from 1996-01 and as mayor from 2001-05, was in favor of turning the famed Thunder Alley into a residential area.

"We certainly didn't want to have a school in the heart of an industrial area," Perlow said.

Traffic was another issue. Studies done then showed that streets with homes would generate the least amount of drivers, according to a staff report by the city that recommended the rezoning in 2001. And once the area turned residential, the land became valuable and developers flooded the area and bought out the boat manufacturers, Beskin said. The city benefited financially by the increase in land value from turning Thunder Alley into a residential area, though it wasn't the intent of the rezoning, City Manager Eric Soroka said.

For Thunder Alley, the writing was on the wall. It was time for a change. "I saw that I was ultimately going to lose that fight," Beskin said.

Although Lisa Knapp likes the way the area has turned out, she said she misses the old Thunder Alley.

"Everything changes," Knapp said.

"You might as well move along with it."