

UP FRONT: Charting a course to success

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Green Bay's ACE Marine is building 166 new Response Boat Medium (RBM) U.S. Coast Guard vessels. Sixty of the boats already have been delivered. ACE Marine and other shipbuilders in the New North have formed the North Coast Marine Manufacturing Alliance to help strengthen the industry and ensure there are enough skilled workers to meet growing demand. Photo courtesy ACE Marine.

Wisconsin's shipbuilders will remember their past and celebrate their future when the tall ships return to Green Bay this summer.

In a way, the Tall Ship Festival, planned for Aug. 16 to 18 at the Port of Green Bay, will be a sort of coming out party for the North Coast Marine Manufacturing Alliance, one of the primary sponsors of the maritime festival. Not only will the festival mark the launch of the fledgling organization's new branding, it will also give the region a chance to celebrate the economic revival that drove its creation.

A partnership involving the area's shipbuilders and Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, the alliance was launched in 2010 to ensure the region's shipbuilding industry had a workforce with the skills to meet the dual demands of government contracts for new ships and a revival in the pleasure boat industry.

"If you don't have the workers that can build an LCS (Littoral Combat Ship) or create a 150-foot yacht, then you can't fill the orders you win," says Ann Franz, alliance coordinator and strategic partnership manager for NWTC. "You have to have the workforce in place."

Working with the alliance, NWTC created several specific marine construction and technology programs, which have produced around 60 graduates – all of whom are now employed within the Wisconsin shipbuilding industry. More are in the pipeline.

There is certainly plenty of work to be done.

In March, the Navy announced it would spend \$697 million dollars to build two more littoral combat ships at Marinette Marine Corp. in Marinette. Marinette Marine already has four ships either under construction or in the preparation stages at its shipyard.

Green Bay's ACE Marine is building 166 new boats for the U.S. Coast Guard, which is considering an addition to its original order of 460 of the vessels, referred to as Response Boat Medium, or RBM. Sixty of the boats have already been delivered.

"We will be growing for a while longer," says Tom Buske, manager of production at ACE Marine.

With a training program in place, the alliance is now turning its attention to other initiatives, helping to improve the supply chain to better manage the material costs, and raising the profile of the area's shipbuilding industry to help fuel further demand.

"The tech is really ramping up the skills program and the alliance is bringing more visibility of the industry," Buske says. "We are starting to see some good things come from it."

One of the ways the alliance will raise its profile is by sponsoring the Tall Ship Festival, which will bring an estimated 60,000 people to Green Bay to see replicas of world-famous sailing ships.

Franz says the alliance is already hard at work expanding the shipbuilding supply chain. The increased visibility has helped to draw attention to both builders and suppliers who were unaware of each other. In February, the alliance met with supplier groups, including the supply consortium Delta Green in Michigan, and has already connected builders looking for particular materials.

Some of the other efforts launched by the alliance:

- » Applying the supply chain initiative to find potential buyers for the scrap materials generated by the industry. As a group, the alliance can command better pricing.
 - » Sharing best practices in areas such as workplace safety to help members lower their workers compensation costs. Rates are set by regional performance.
 - » Increasing opportunities for exports by the region's shipbuilders, such as positioning the region as a supplier for an upcoming \$35 billion fleet upgrade by the Canadian Coast Guard.
- The success of the region's shipbuilding industry is a welcome respite from the difficult times preceding it. The alliance, a product of the recent success by the region's shipbuilders, will play a key role in charting a course that positions the industry for even more growth.

"We sort of had a perfect storm," Franz says. "At the same time we landed the LCS contracts, the pleasure craft industry revived. Now we want to make sure that continues."