2024 Legislative Session Includes Boating Measures
By Linda A. Kowalski

The 2024 Legislative Session of the Connecticut General Assembly dealt with a myriad of significant issues. A number of measures passed that affect the recreational boating sector. Here is a summary.

A positive development was passage of a bill, H.B. 5432, Special Act No. 24-2, to start the process of determining how the Greater Mystic area can better handle, and grow, tourism. As many of you know who have visited the area, there is traffic gridlock on many roads and a general lack of parking near the major attractions. Many businesses lack entry level staff who are not able to live in the area due to housing costs. Fortunately, the 30–plus members of the working group will roll up their sleeves and determine specific steps that can make the towns of Groton, New London and Stonington more attractive for recreation and tourism.

As part of this, the charge to the working group includes a review of the dredging needs of the Mystic River and Thames River, something that is important for area marinas. We have worked to ensure that CMTA will be at the table. The House co-chair of the Commerce committee, which reported out the legislation, is developing several subgroups to delve into several issues more deeply, and we will be represented on one or more of them. As many of you know, Southeastern Connecticut has become a major source of tourism revenue and activity in the state.

Another bill, H.B. No. 5222, now Public Act 24-10, that passed relates specifically to boating in Southeastern Connecticut. It creates a "slow-no-wake zone" for boating vessel operators on the Pawcatuck River. The zones will limit a boat's speed and the size of the wake it produces. There will be enforcement of this new provision by officers of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) which can ticket violators with a $100 fine. Complaints about speeding boats in this heavily trafficked waterway prompted the legislation.

A third bill, HB No. 5350, now Public Act 24-123, will boost enforcement of boating laws in border areas. Under it, an environmental conservation officer can cross over to New York or Rhode Island if they are pursuing a boater who is violating the law. Violators may be brought to trial in the state where the violation happened. Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York will need to enact a similar law for this to be fully effective.

On a different issue, legislation was passed in HB No. 5524, now Public Act No. 24-151, Section 126, to create a working group that will examine tax expenditures in the state. These are defined as tax exemptions, exclusions, deductions or credits that result in less revenue to the state than would otherwise accrue. Members of the group will include the Governor (or his designee), the co-chairs and ranking members of the legislature's Finance, Revenue and Bonding committee and representatives from two state departments: Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) and Department of Revenue Services (DRS). Rounding out the nine-member group will be two representatives from the Office of Policy and Management.

You may ask why do we care about this? The answer is the sales tax rate on the sale of a vessel is 2.99 percent, the kind of special rate that this group is likely to look at. We have worked extremely hard in the past to enact this lower rate to promote boat sales in Connecticut and have defended it repeatedly when it has come under criticism. As you know from our past updates, there are some legislators who believe the rate should be the customary 6.35 percent sales tax rate.

The working group is required to issue a report on the issue together with recommendations by January 1, 2025. We will be monitoring the work of this group closely as much is at stake for the recreational boating sector.

Meanwhile, we continue to move forward with the important legislation that we worked to have passed this session on small harbor improvements. House Bill 5189, was CMTA's priority and we got it through the House and Senate by a Senate vote of 36 yea to 0 nay, unanimous, and by a House vote of 148 yea to 1 nay and 2 absent. Thank you to those CMTA members who contacted their legislators on the proposal.

Governor Lamont signed the bill as Public Act 24 - 48 on May 28, at which point it became effective and is now law. We are now starting preliminary discussions with executive branch officials to seek funding of this new account in the upcoming two-year budget that will be crafted by the Lamont administration and then forwarded to the General Assembly in the 2025 legislative session. What is unique about our bill is that funds specifically can be made available to help defray some of the costs of marina dredging projects.

The government relations team and CMTA leadership participated in a recent roundtable session with state Senator Cathy Osten and other stakeholders on issues relating to dredging. One bit of good news is there had been a fear that the remaining $2.25 million earmarked in the current budget for dredging would disappear unless they were spent by December 31, 2024. The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) assured everyone that these are state dollars, not federal; therefore, they can be utilized beyond that point. We will continue to update CMTA members on this important issue in future newsletters.

Finally, I wanted to mention the upcoming election on Tuesday, November 5. All 151 seats in the state House and 36 seats in the state Senate will be on the ballot. Please take the time to learn your local candidates' positions on the issues, including their support for recreational boating in Connecticut. Most candidates will have a Facebook page or website where you can learn more about their campaigns.

In the meantime, please continue to enjoy Connecticut's beautiful waterways this summer!