

When the State Ports Authority tried to close down the shrimp docks at Port Royal a few months ago, people around here got pretty alarmed. They wanted the place to stay open – not so much because they bought a lot of shrimp there, but because the shrimp boats are such an iconic presence in this peaceful little town.



It was a difficult situation. The owner of the land, the SC State Ports Authority, was trying to sell the property to developers, and it wanted to clean the place up a bit so it would look nicer and sell faster. But after the public outcry, the Ports Authority backed off from its plans to remove fuel tanks and other infrastructure from the docks.

This would have been the end of the docks in Port Royal. Getting all of the permits and approvals to build it all up again would have taken tremendous amount of time and resources.

The Town of Port Royal, mindful of the cultural significance and visual appeal of the shrimp docks, stepped up to the plate and offered to help keep the operation going. They agreed to foot the bill for insurance and other costs on an interim basis.

Capt. Mark Smith, a Port Royal native and a shrimper, made a commitment to try to keep the docks and market running.

Now it is our turn to do something.

To keep the docks running in Port Royal, we need to go there and buy stuff.

There's plenty of good reason to. Along with fresh shrimp, the market has fresh flounder, whiting, crabs, crab meat, and oysters in shell.

They often carry shucked oysters from Bluffton Oyster Company, but they sell out fast. I prefer the salty tang of our local oysters, but I ended up buying some from the Gulf Coast. They were fresh and meaty, though not quite as flavorful as the ones from the Lowcountry's high-salinity waters.

We still have several months to take advantage of oyster season. But the shrimp season will be ending soon, so if you want fresh shrimp, you'd best buy now.

And you have some extra time to buy. Usually the season ends soon after Christmas. But unless conditions change, it looks as if the shrimp season will be extended until the end. What does a shrimp company sell when it doesn't have fresh local shrimp?

The next best thing, which is frozen local shrimp.

Capt. Smith will be buying 5 pound blocks of frozen local shrimp from his buddies.

It works this way: he thaws out a small quantity at a time and puts them in the showcase. If you come in and want just a couple of pounds, this is what you get. This shrimp should not be refrozen.

If you need larger quantities, though, it's best to buy the 5-pound boxes. You thaw them out by leaving them in the refrigerator, or by putting them in a sink and running cool water over them.

The boxes of frozen shrimp are also a good bet if you are traveling a great distance, or if you need to store the shrimp in your freezer for some time before using it.

Jessalyn Beatty is the person behind the counter most of the time. She will be happy to

answer any questions, and if you get fresh fish, she will help prepare it for cooking.

Capt. Smith calls her “the best fish cutter in the world.

It’s good he has someone he can rely on to run the market because he needs to have time to run his shrimp boat, the High Tide.

Smith also credits his mentor, Craig Reaves, with helping him get the business set up.

Reaves and his wife, Jana, operate CJ Seafood Express. It’s located right next to Alvin Ord’s in Port Royal.

The Reaves have also taken over the old Sea Eagle Market on Boundary Street. I’ll be writing about them, and about other local seafood markets, in a future column.

From a business perspective, this is a really interesting example of coopetition – cooperative competition. It’s also a good example of a social enterprise. This is a business that pays the usual attention to the bottom-line, but in addition to the goal of profit, it has explicitly stated sociocultural goals as well.

The Port Royal enterprise is in its infancy, but it shows great promise.

The only problem now is that the redevelopment of the port property – and the expected upswing in business in the town -- are still a long way off.

It looks as if it’s going to be at least a year before things get moving.

That’s because there was a delay in selling the property. And that kind of made the timeline for development get out of whack.

It’s not really the state’s fault. The guys who drafted up the state surplus guidelines were not thinking about the sale of a multimillion-dollar piece of real estate. In writing the rules for disposing of surplus, they were thinking old desks and typewriters. And selling off old typewriters is not exactly like selling high-end waterfront property.

So long story short, the initial bids for the property were way too low. They had to start the process all over again, but the second time around they hired a real estate agency to market the place. It worked like a charm.

If all goes well and the deal goes through, the property is going to sell for a nice, high price. But the investors who want to buy the land need a year-long extension to the timeline in the development agreement.

So it’s going to be a long haul for Capt. Smith, and for the Town of Port Royal.

When I asked Capt. Smith if he had anything he wanted to communicate to people, he said, “Come on down and support me so we can stay open.”

I hope you will do just that.

If you go:

The Port Royal Shrimp

Company

1111 11th Street

(843)524-6138

Open Monday through

Saturday

10 a.m. through 6 p.m.

Credit cards accepted.