

A report into nature and scope of member's experiences of the Bendigo Yacht Club

Introduction

Research, like this investigation, is undertaken because someone wants to find out answers to questions that are thought to be important for some reason or another. In this case the committee had questioned how the Bendigo Yacht Club was servicing its members, and how it may enhance the experience of members. Ultimately, the committee is charged with improving membership retention and encouraging new members. These issues are central to the club's strategic plan.

The questions this research wanted to answer were:

- How do members currently use the club, how often do they come to the club, in what ways, and with whom?
- What are the most important aspects of visitation for members?
- What sorts of activities might members find of interest in addition to the current sailing program?
- Should the Club expand its focus beyond sailing and the emphasis on racing?
- What do members think about the current club fees and charges?
- What insights might club members suggest to enhance the experiences of all members?
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It is the intent of this report, by answering the above questions, to identify key topics for consideration and discussion by the committee and membership. It will not make recommendations.

Dr Sandra Tunley and Assoc. Prof. Peter Martin undertook the research on behalf of the committee. They chose to gather information (data) to respond to the research questions via a telephone survey of the current members. Some members chose to complete the survey via email responses. The 2020/21 list of members was used as the base population. All of the 110 members were contacted, 69 completed the survey. (Throughout this report the letter "n" is used to indicate the number of people who responded in each question/category.)

The results were analysed and are presented here in summary tables and discussion. We have used commonly employed research methodology to help condense the volume of information from many hours of telephone conversations. We have worked to ensure our summaries are trustworthy and do justice to individual comments, while it's never possible to copy every remark, the intent of opinions should be incorporated within this report.

Who responded?

Tables 1 and 2 describe the demographics of the total membership and the survey respondents.

Table 1.

Average age of Club members (n=110)	Average age responding to survey (n=69)
60	63.3

Table 2.

Club gender mix		Percentage	Gender of survey respondents	Percentage	Member % participating in the survey
Females	25	22.7%	18	27.8%	72%
Males	85	77.3%	51	72.2%	60%
Total	110	100%	69	100%	62.7%

*Ratio of males to females = 1:4

The tables above indicate the survey was able to capture responses from an effective number and representation of members. Our only hesitation is that, although the survey was mentioned in the club's mainsheet and an email sent to all members, the survey effectively required blind calling members. Younger members were more likely to be working or engaged with family matters and perhaps less likely to be free to participate or respond to missed calls. The current plague of spam phone calls meant that sometimes the researchers called several times with no response, although messages were left if possible.

We were unable to obtain comment from younger members and the average age of respondents was a few years higher than the club average. Figure 1 shows the majority of respondents were either veteran or full members

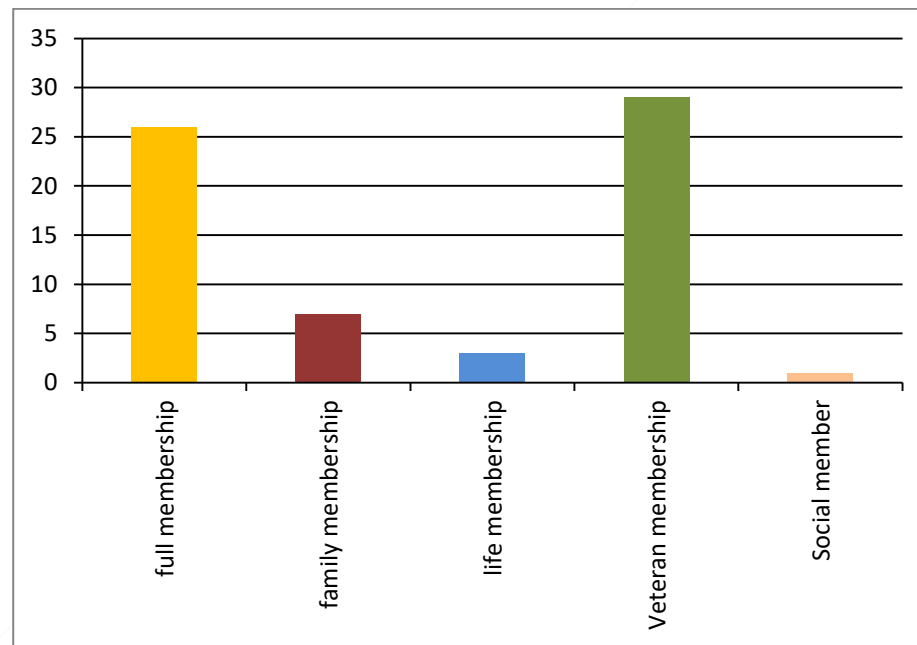


Figure 1: **Membership profile (n=66)**

Do we sail?

Unsurprisingly, most of the club members are sailors. Equally surprisingly perhaps, only two thirds of the membership are *currently* sailing. Although most have been active sailors in the past, various circumstances now mean that a significant proportion of the club membership are no longer now sailing (Fig. 2).

How the club caters for, supports and encourages club community involvement for the non active members is a consideration for further discussion.

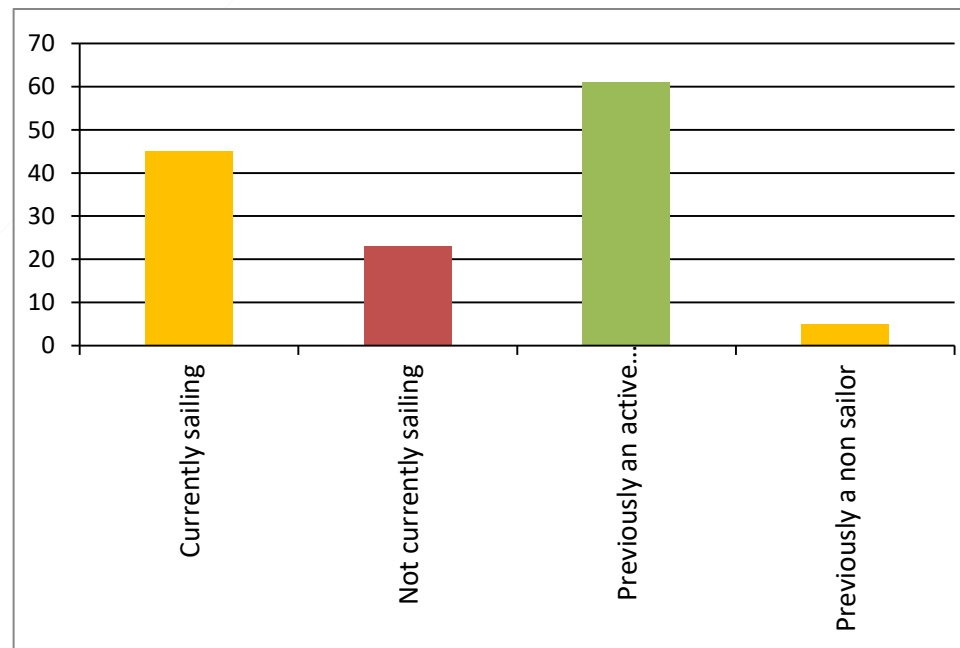


Figure 2. **Active or past sailors**

The club sailors sail a mix of 1 up or 2 up boats (Fig. 3). For most, finding consistent reliable crew wasn't an issue. Family members or friend groups were most common in crewed vessels. There was some evidence that as families grow up and circumstances change, sailors may change to a single handed boat out of necessity rather than desire. Single handed sailors were equally divided on the importance of being able to sail alone with over half saying that sailing single handed was more a convenience or necessity rather than an importance. Several members would welcome opportunity for new (or old) members to take up crew positions and a mechanism for this could be helpful.

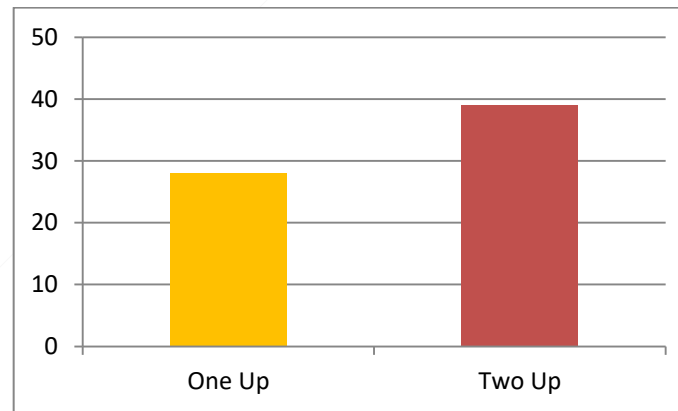


Figure 3: **Single handed or crewed? (n=67)**

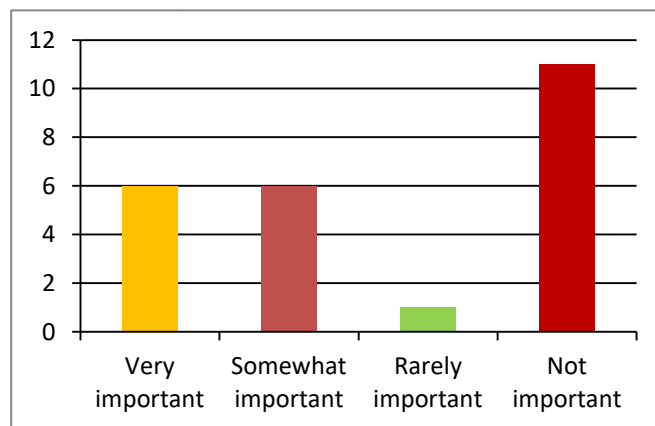


Figure 4: **How important is it to be able to sail alone? (n=24)**

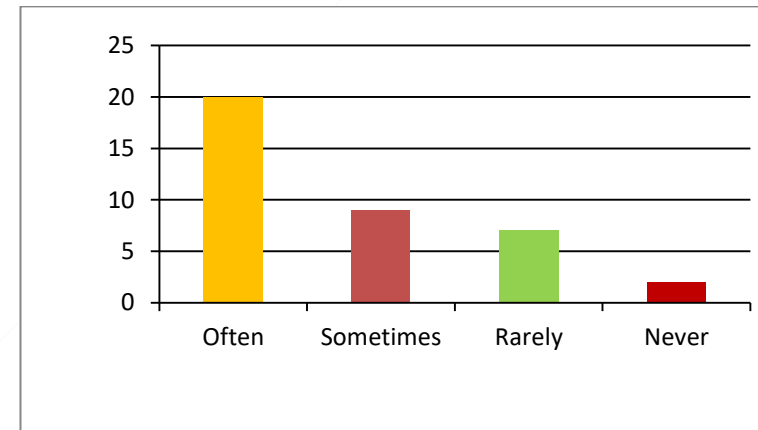


Figure 5: **Can you find a crew easily? (n=38)**

How often do members come to the Yacht Club?

The last 18 months has been anything but normal, with COVID restrictions locking out visitors and curtailing activities, particularly social gatherings. However, the researchers attempted to have people respond to questions by reflecting upon a more typical year. The majority of respondents were very active, with over half visiting the club site over 15 times a year, with many expressing they visited weekly during the warmer months (Fig.6). There were however, nearly a third of respondents who visited the club five times or less. There were a range of reasons offered, mostly related to work and other activities. These results suggest significant scope for the club to increase its visitation and usage *within* the existing membership as well as attracting new members.

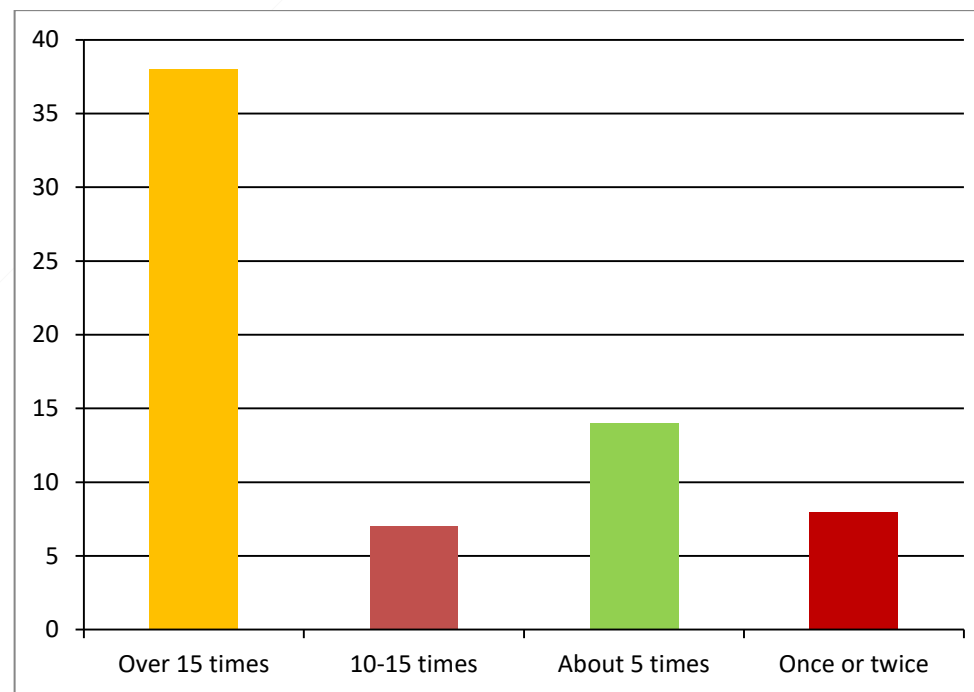


Figure 6: **How often do you visit the club per year?** (n=67)

Why do members come to the Club site?

A key issue for the health of any community based organisation is ensuring the practices, offerings and structures are well matched to the needs and motives of the membership. Members were therefore asked to nominate their top three reasons for visiting the club. There are multiple and diverse reasons for members to visit the club site. Additionally, motives change over time with variation to a member's circumstances that could include family, residential location, health or work demands. These were all cited in various ways by different respondents as factors that influenced why they participated in the club. Of the multiple reasons for visiting the site, sailing in championship races was nominated first by nearly one third of respondents, and was the most common prime reason cited (Fig. 7). Social sailing was the second most common first choice for almost a quarter of respondents.

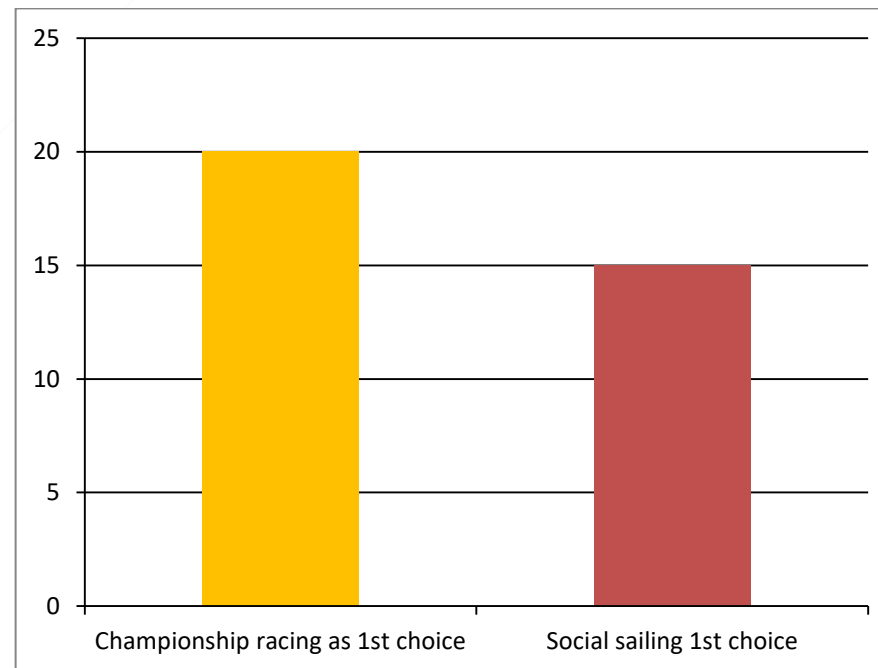


Figure 7: **First choice reason for attendance** (n=41)

However, if we summarize all of the top three reasons cited for attendance then the most common reason is to sail socially (Fig. 8). This is a significant finding in that the club primarily organises championship and trophy races throughout the summer, yet social sailing features most prominently as a reason to attend the club. Members prioritized a wide range of reasons for attending the club site other than those listed above. Some members nominated: assisting in race organisation, training courses, instructing, working bees, fishing, checking /maintaining boats, or just being around the club as prime reasons.

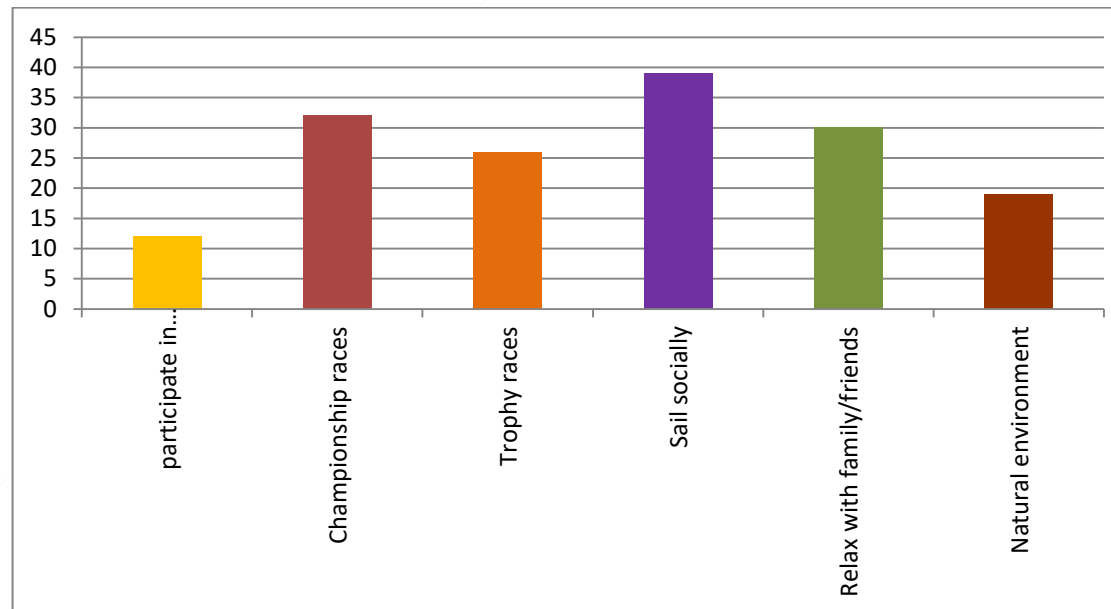


Figure 8: **Summary of the top three reasons to visit the Club?** (n=69)

The question of why someone visits a club is perhaps the most difficult to qualify as often a stated reason, such as to race, is underscored by other motives. Several people for example, suggested they attend primarily to race because racing provides a conduit to connect with a community, a reason to chat with others or socialize after the race. In effect racing was a social rather than competitive or fitness motive. The club also prioritizes racing over other forms of activity and so it is expected that racing features prominently in member's rationales for attending. The reasons for attending were examined further by a set of questions that asked respondents to rate the *importance* of different activities.

Data are presented in Figures 9 and 10 for the importance of competitive racing and social sailing respectively. Responses here help us better understand the priority choices members are making.

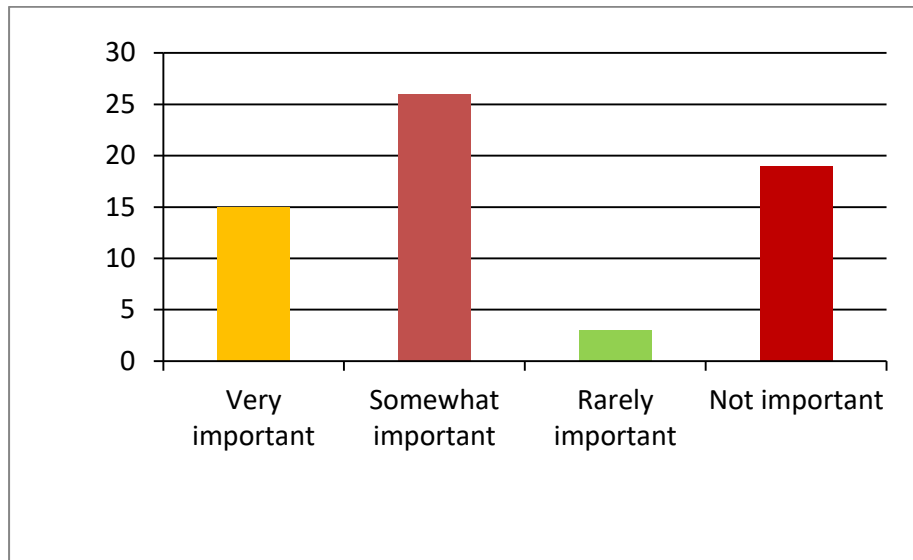


Figure 9 **How important is competitive racing?** (n=63)

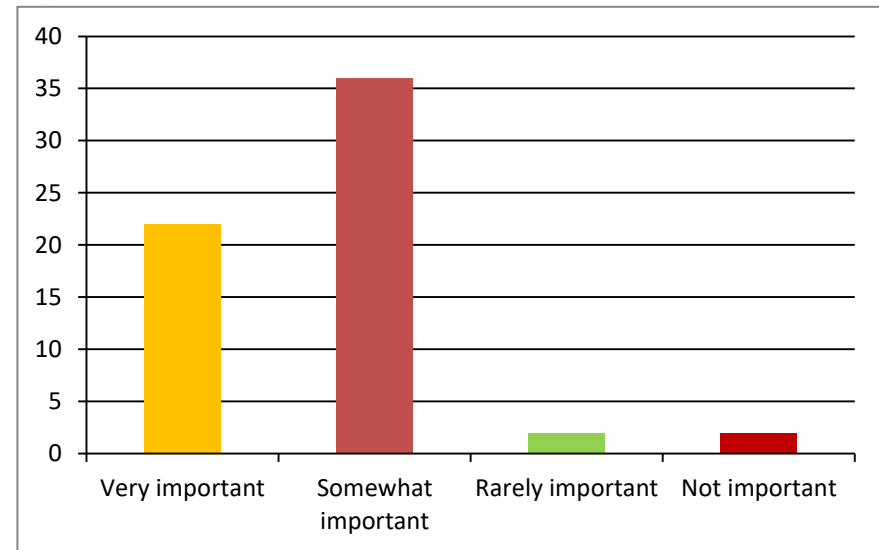


Figure 10. **How important is social sailing?** (n=62)

Social sailing is somewhat or very important to nearly all (58 of 62) respondents to the survey. This exceeds the importance of competitive sailing which is rarely or not important to 18 of the 63 people who responded to this question. Perhaps the priority of the competitive racing calendar is one that should be further discussed and examined. However, no-one wanted to reduce competitive racing and several specific additional comments were received to emphasize the value and desirability to maintain races.

One of the most unified responses from the members surveyed was the importance of socializing around sailing. Regardless of the member's interests in racing or social sailing there was strong agreement that socializing around sailing was of significant importance (Fig 11). No-one thought this not important while 33 of the 62 respondents to this question thought is *very* important.

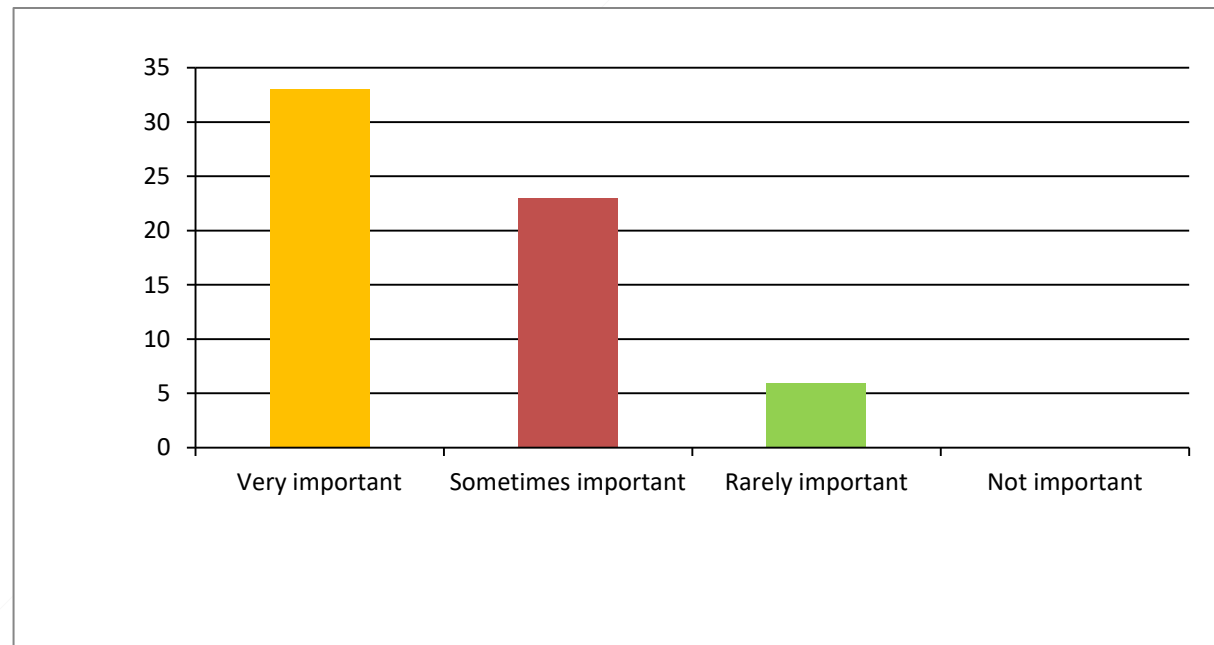


Figure 11. **How important is socializing around sailing?** (n=62)

It's worthwhile to recognise within this data that interest in social contact is most when centred around the shared experience of sailing and that the type of sailing undertaken is of less relevance. Although this is hardly surprising for members of a sailing club, it highlights that members are seeking to be part of a community with shared interests and connections. This conclusion is reinforced by responses to further questions around socialization. Members were fairly evenly divided on their interest in attending the club for social occasions, as evidenced in Figure 12. However, in response to later questions about member interest in attending social functions either away from the club or as an extension of a Saturday, quite different views were expressed. There was considerable support for a gathering at the club linked to sailing, such as a BBQ on a Saturday evening (fig.13). However, members were less interested in social events that were organised away from the club site (Fig. 14). Responses indicated a close to equal division between members who often or sometimes bring friends to the club and those who rarely or never do so (Fig 15). These results

suggest general support for post race social gatherings while indicating limited support for off site social functions. There remains considerable scope for members to invite family and friends, and for the club to be better prepared to accommodate and accept visitors.

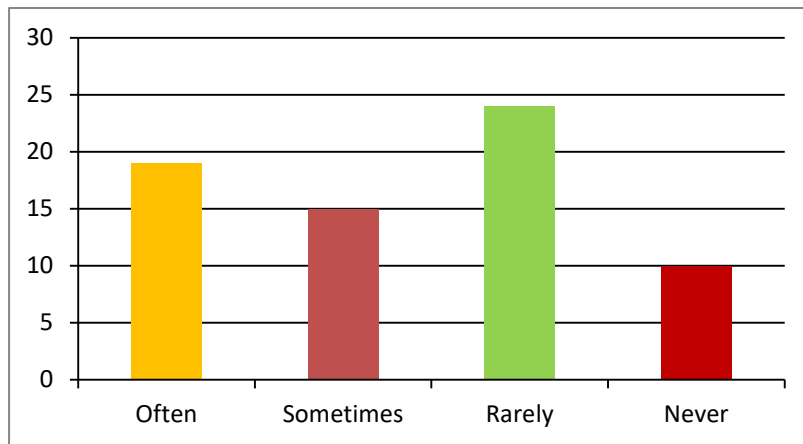


Figure 12: **Attending the club for social occasions** (n=58)

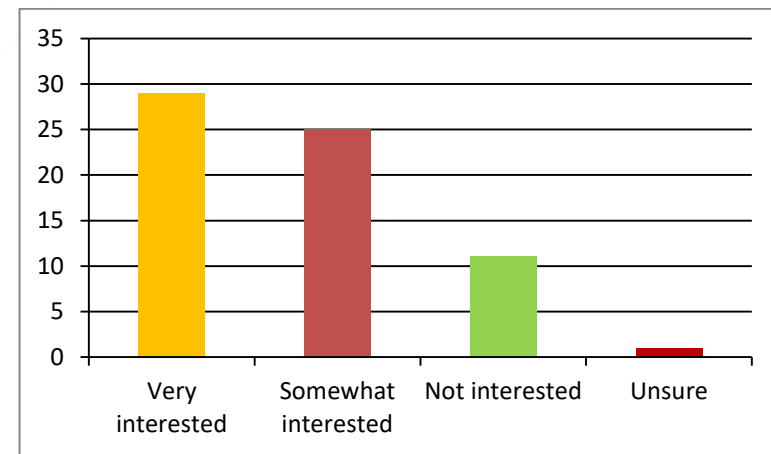


Figure 13: **Interest in social events at the Club** (n=66)

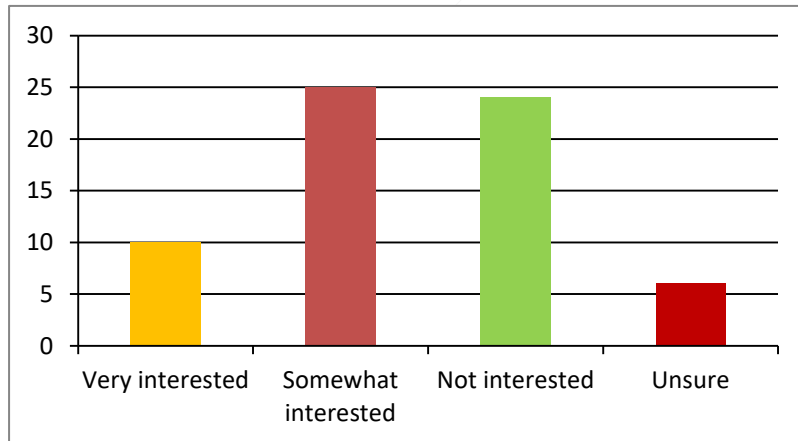


Figure 14: **Interest in social gatherings away from the club** (n=65)

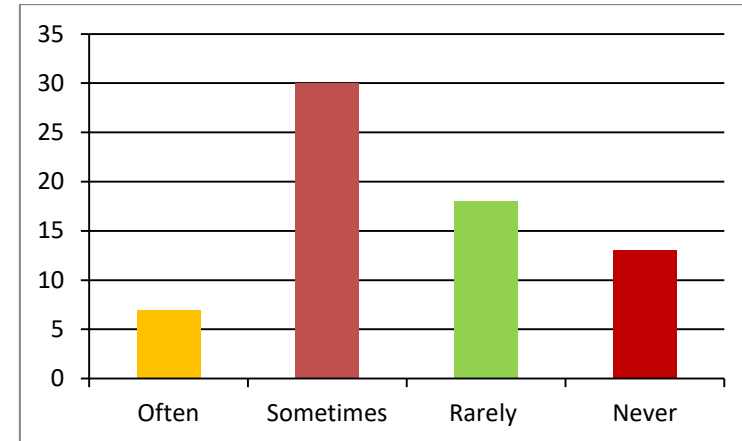


Figure 15: **Bringing family or friends out** (n=68)

The remarks above on socialization were strongly reinforced by comments from participants later in interviews. Twelve comments were raised suggesting options for the club to increase socialization, with an emphasis on improving opportunities for those who sail infrequently or are not active sailors. Suggestions included: developing more family friendly policy, promoting interactions between sailors and caravanners, brainstorming creative ideas for fun activities, or hosting alternative events such as live music, triathlons or community fun days. Novelty or paddleboard races were also suggested when lack of wind cancels racing. The focus of these suggestions seem all towards increasing the opportunity for all groups within the club to interact and share experiences with the single aim of improved social cohesion and camaraderie. One innovative but clear example of this, was the suggestion to operate a spectator boat during races so that non-sailors could get a closer look to better understand and participate in race days, thus improving the opportunity for socialization around sailing (see Fig. 11).

Other activities to support sailing

There has been ongoing discussion among some members of ways to better provide for the membership and to encourage use of the club facilities. It was this that was partially instrumental in initiating this survey. Consequently we included a number of possible activities that could be offered to help gauge interest. Interest in social events away from and at the club are reported above. In addition we asked member's interest in being involved in sailing related activity such as: seminars on race rules or sail performance, workshops on boat fit-out or maintenance, and picnic cruise options. Data are presented below in Figures 16, 17, 18.

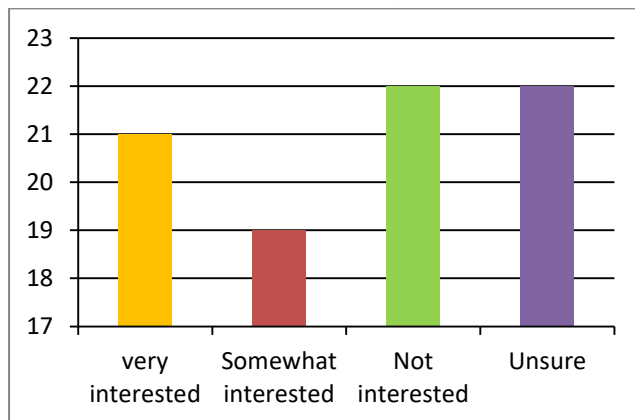


Figure 16: **Interest in sailing related seminars** (n=62)

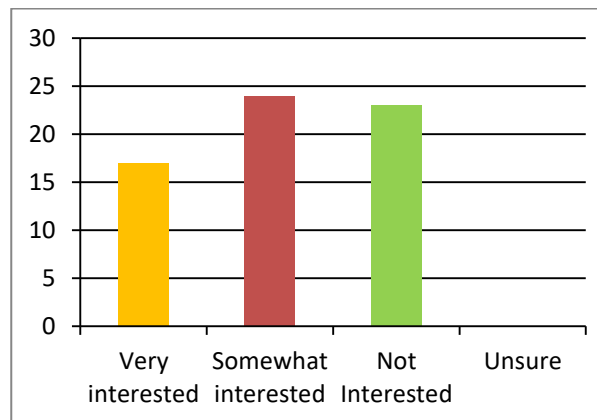


Figure 17: **Interest in workshops on boats** (n=64)

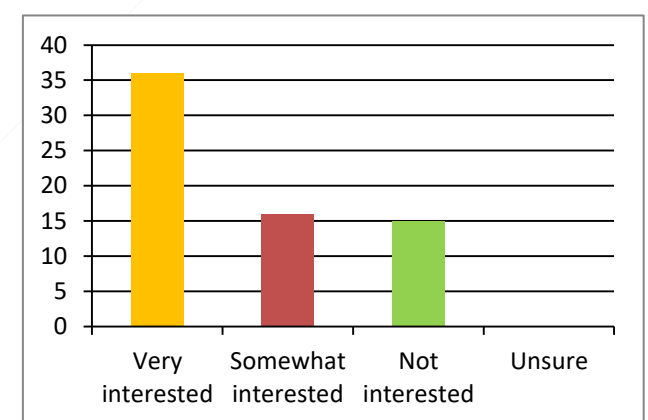


Figure 18: **Interest in Picnic Cruises**(n=67)

There is a distribution of interest for most activities. Offering picnic cruises would seem to be the most sought after activity beyond what the club is already engaged with.

In addition, we asked if participants were interested in being involved with midweek projects such as has been undertaken in previous months by the group of members that gathered on Wednesday's to refurbish the women's change rooms. By virtue of work commitments many members are unavailable midweek. However, there was considerable interest in the midweek gatherings continuing, with several people also wanting to incorporate a midweek social sail into such meetings.

Over half respondents were at least somewhat interested in volunteer training for race days so as to increase their involvement within the club. The club already offers induction into the conduct of races for those rostered on, but these results indicate more could be done to invite members to develop race support skills. Several currently non-active sailors suggested regularly helping out on race days would be something they welcomed.

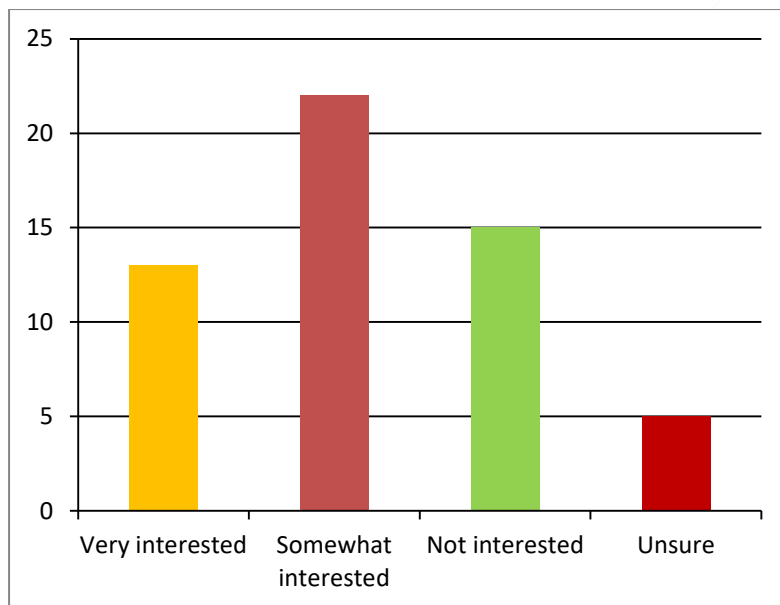


Figure 19: Interest in midweek projects (n=55)

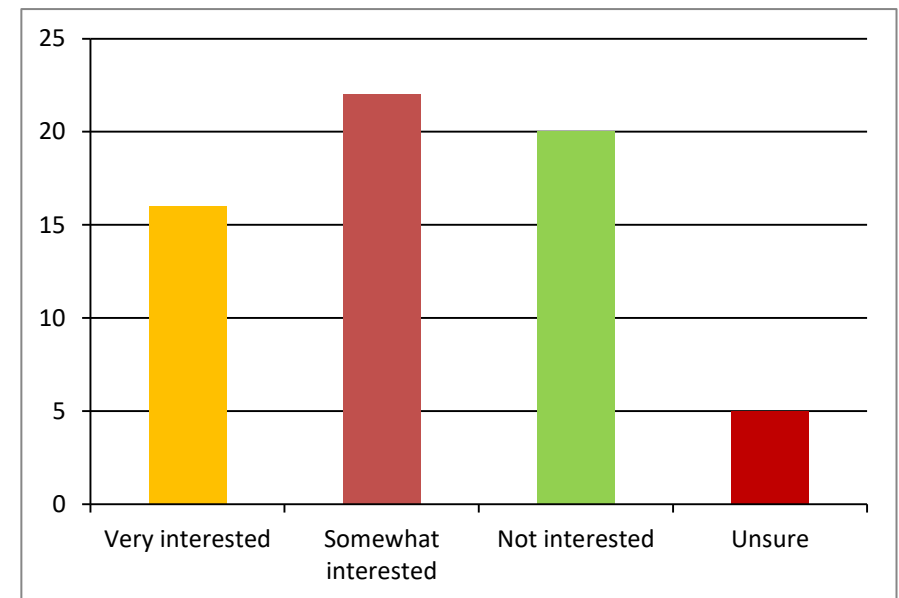


Figure 20: Interest in volunteer race day training (n=61)

Should the club expand its interest and membership beyond sailing?

The focus of the Bendigo Yacht Club is self explanatory in its name. However, as evidenced by several Australia wide reports from Australian sailing, participation in sailing is in decline. This is especially so for younger people and families. Bendigo Yacht club reflects this trend. Our membership profile is skewed towards an ageing mostly male population, where men outnumber women in the club almost four to one, and our most common membership category is a veteran over 65 years of age. As was described by the club's treasurer, as veteran members receive a 50% discount on fees, the club reaches a point where membership income fails to cover annual holding costs. It is therefore in the interests of all members to reconsider the nature and scope of the club's activities.

About one third of current members engage in activities at the club site that are other than sailing (Fig.21). It is logical therefore that the majority of the respondents to this survey agreed that the club should or could be promoting activities beyond sailing (Fig. 22).

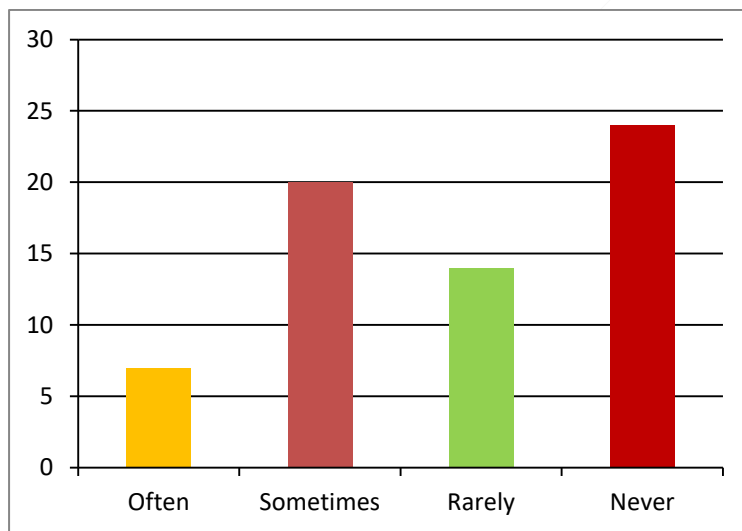


Figure 21: Participation in activities other than sailing at the club(n=65)

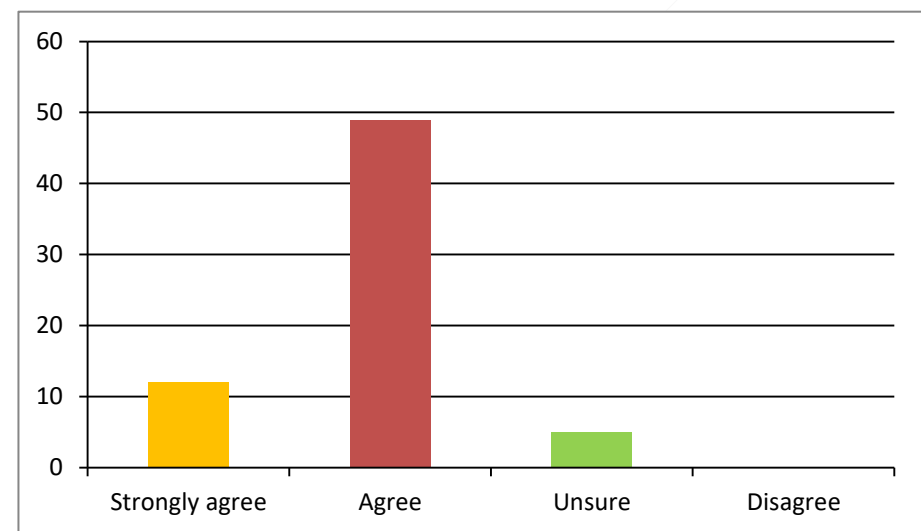


Figure 22 Support for BeYC to promote other than sailing (n=66)

The alternative, or additional activities that members most support are those reliant on non-motorized transport. Paddleboards, kayaking/canoeing and windsurfing were seen as equally complementary to sailing. As most members are aware, the club obtained a set of six stand up paddleboards in 2020 from Australian Sailing as a mechanism to support the *Out There Sailing* program and encourage more diverse participation. There remains scope for the club to further encourage diversity of activity into the future as a means to both better support existing members in their use of the facilities and to encourage new members.

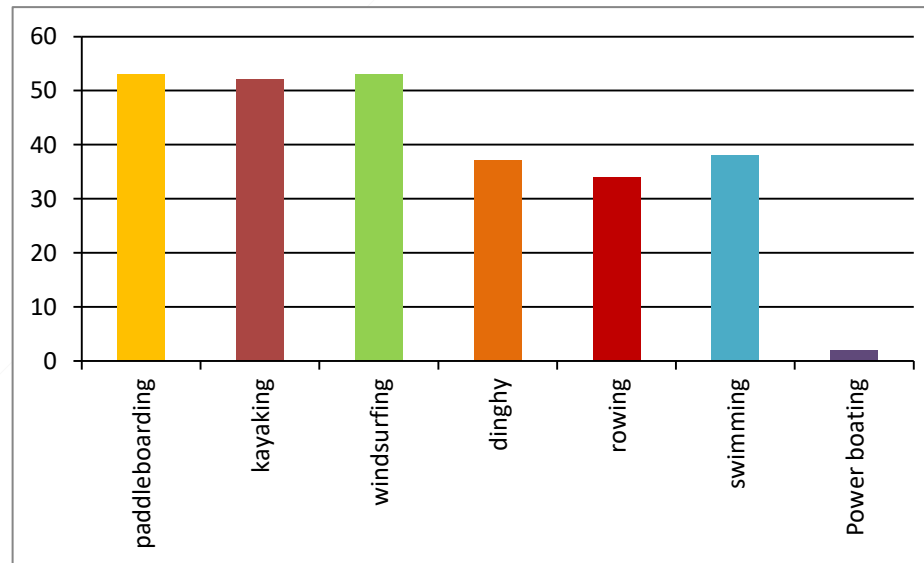


Figure 23: **What activities other than sailing would you support?**

Many of the responses to this question specifically noted that they would *not* support motorised water craft, especially jet skis or motorized boats within the club site. There was moderate support for activities such as launching a fishing dinghy, although most felt this is okay provided this was a side activity of a sailing member. The main concerns were that sailing must remain as the club primary focus and that other activities need to be suitably managed so as to not interfere with launching or landing of sail craft. Many members recognised that there are multiple ways to enjoy the site and we should not be blinkered in our view of how to build a stronger water based community and make better use of our excellent lakeside facilities. There were several suggestions that the club could seek a strategic partnership with like minded groups such as a canoe club or similar. There was the suggestion that a swimming pontoon could be an asset in the warmer weather if positioned to not interfere with sailing.

What do members think about the current club fees and charges?

Most members believe their current fees are about right (Fig.24). Variance to this occurs as a consequence of individual circumstances or situations and it's worthwhile to examine these.

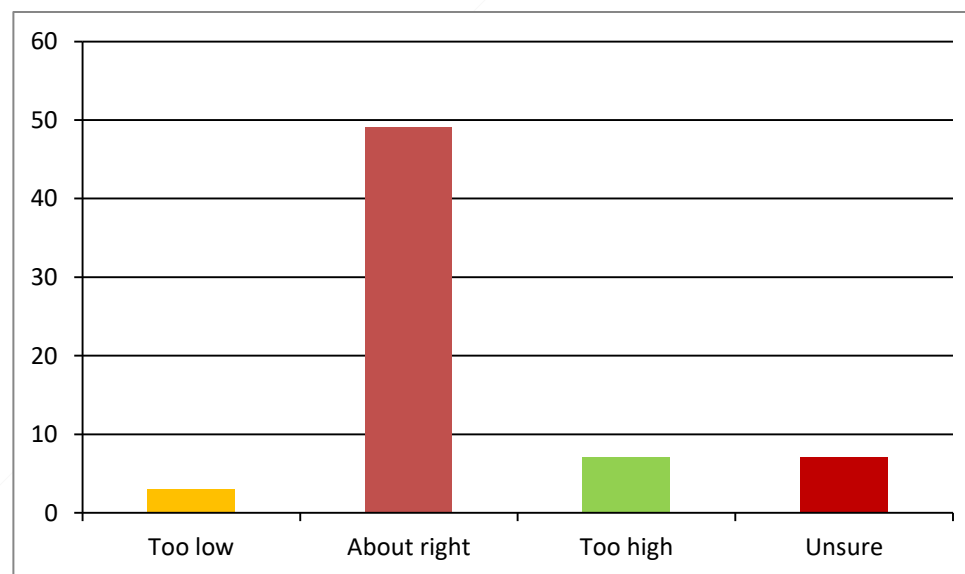


Figure 24 **Current Club fees are...?** (n=66)

In response to more open ended questions 42 of the 69 respondents specifically explored membership and fees in more detail. It is not the role of this report to make recommendations. However, it is useful to note the circumstances and suggestions that have been raised regarding fees. There were five main areas of concern, including: the structure of fees, fees for families, boat storage costs, caravan site fee, and fundraising.

The structure of fees. Nine people specifically commented the fees need to be reviewed with many others doing so by implication. This appears to be despite the majority reporting they thought fees were “about right”. It seems that this has arisen due to differing individual circumstances as well as observations about how the fees may influence others rather than themselves. Four people were very aware that the club income from fees does not currently cover the club annual operating costs, which ought provide an imperative to review the fees structure. There were several (n=8) remarks about the current structure and the 50% discount available to veterans. Most of these thought the differentiation in fees should arise between sailors and non-sailors rather than be age based; or, capacity to pay, so pensioners had a discounted rate. (The club does currently have a 50% discount for social membership, although this does not include voting rights, boat storage access or caravan site options.) One respondent

considered the veteran reduction appropriate as it was mostly the retired members who saved the club substantial costs through volunteer work and maintenance. Regardless, these comments suggest a fees review would be prudent and also enable a clearer understanding of the financial reliance of the club on fees and the different options currently available to be better communicated to members.

Fees for families. The club does not have a large number of family members, and many lamented that this was the case. Several people commented that they initially were family members but due to the combination of higher cost and less use from the rest of the family, they had “dropped” to a single member category. Some thought family membership was too high, especially if a child was over 18 but still dependent. There were a few comments about how the club ought be encouraging membership of families, particularly younger families and those under 25.

Boat storage costs. Comments around the storage of boats on site were mixed. Some thought them fair, others less so. There seemed to be two main issues. Firstly while members acknowledged the process of setting fees for membership, fees for storage (or caravans) did not have a good transparent process and this causes some anxiety. Secondly, when someone has multiple craft, and perhaps a caravan, the fees mount up quickly and it can become too expensive. This is particularly the case for family members who are again paying more. One person thought the yard storage too high compared to under cover storage. It maybe worthwhile to consider having a discount to those who have multiple rental spaces. and to better communicate and discuss the rental charges.

Caravan site costs. The few respondents (n=4) who commented on caravan fees thought they were a bit high. This was especially the case over the past year or more when COVID restrictions have limited the use and availability of the site.

Fundraising. Fundraising comments (n=3) generally indicated that raising money to supplement fees and keep them affordable was a good idea and a worthwhile pursuit for the club.

Promotion or involvement.

We asked people if they would like to promote or be more involved with club activities. Comments seemed to cluster into five areas. Namely: novelty and social activities, coaching and training, assistance with water activities, food, promotion of the club, and working bees.

Across the five categories shown it indicated that social activities around water and land were important and those who commented on this were willing to be actively involved. These ranged from taking spectator boats out on race days to bringing friends and acquaintances to kayak midweek.

Along with people being involved in the working bees to keep the buildings and grounds of the club in order, members indicated a desire to be involved in a range of things from novelty races with family involvement to socialising around the service of food.

Suggestions indicate there are abilities in the membership that the club could better tap into. There are some members who have a licence to drive heavy machinery for example, while others have experiences in promotional capabilities. Promoting the club to schools and the university market may be a way to expand membership particularly if these students involve their families.

Other comments on issues of importance to members

The survey contained the structured and semi structured questions reported above. It concluded with an open ended question inviting respondents to voice any topic they considered of importance to the management and future directions of the club. There were many interesting and significant issues raised. In all 78 individual comments were recorded. Some of these have been woven into the above discussions where relevant. The remaining can be discussed under four categories: grounds and facilities; novice sailor opportunities; advocacy, and inclusivity and diversity.

Grounds and facilities. Generally members see the facilities as excellent for a club of this nature and appreciate the work of the committees in maintaining and developing the club over the years. The new deck and bar were identified as key new assets of value to social outcomes, with one person keen to see new bright, comfortable furniture added to the deck. There were several comments around the need to modernise and update the appearance of the facilities. "It reeks of the 70's" was an indicative quotation. There were comments about the need to clean up the grounds and remove boats "rotting under trees". Two comments suggested creation of more user friendly water side area, perhaps including an artificial beach ("funded by a bucket appeal") for boat launching, umbrellas and water activity. Several comments reminded us of the imperative to maintain existing facilities and/or upgrade facilities such as the kitchen. The kitchen was suggested for relocation into the committee room space and to be upgraded to a commercial level, able to serve food directly onto the deck.

Novice sailor opportunities. Several members commented that the sailing school is an ideal but perhaps under-realised pathway to membership. People thought races for novices, tokens for participation, continued tuition or mentoring could all play a role in encouraging retention and continuation from the Sailing School. One member thought the label of “School” was in itself off- putting for young people.

Club advocacy. Eleven comments were forthcoming concerning promotion of what the club has to offer. There were two key themes; improving communications, and links with other organisations. Comments relating to communication were seeking the club to make more use of the full range of conventional media, social media, community displays and links with local Councils. Several thought better links to schools or like minded clubs could be sources of membership and expansion. One comment suggested member discounts be negotiated with businesses prepared to support the club.

Inclusivity and diversity. We received most comments around notions that we have labelled *diversity and inclusivity*. Perhaps this is to be expected in any organisation wanting to grow membership, but especially where the current demographic is as skewed as the Bendigo Yacht Club. The initial and most obvious group that commented were those members who due to either residential location, health or work demands were on the fringes of club activity. Many cited the difficulty of attending working bees or contributing in other ways due to the factors listed. Flexibility in days when organised sailing takes place could help some, as could relationships with members prepared to work with less regular crew or those less able.

The final set of comments are both challenging and exciting. Many members recognised the need for diversity of membership, and the need to be deliberately more inclusive, particularly of women and families. There was a strong desire to build an inclusive community that embraced those not as skilled at sailing, as race focussed, nor event sailing focussed. This was particularly important for women who may have less opportunity, or feel less supported to develop skills, or wish to be involved in a different way. One person suggested “women only” activities or training. Interestingly, Sandra as a female researcher had more of these conversations than Peter. This is to be expected, and it highlights the imperative for the club to seek a more balanced gender profile in all its workings at administrative and organisational decision making to better hear the voices of women.

There was comment that the club was a safe environment for families, but that it could improve its communication between various stakeholders. One member suggested an introductory session for new members that showed them around the club. There were several

comments about encouraging families, making activities child friendly and have incentives in membership for families. There were several remarks around the value of bringing friends, particularly with children, to the club and developing ways to make them feel welcomed.

The overriding theme both explicitly and by implication in these comments, is that the Club “needs to modernise” , “be innovative and respond to change”, “be aware of cultural change” , “bring people on board”, and consequently reap the rewards through membership growth. As several members commented, this is an exciting time to be involved.

Concluding remarks

There is much to digest and understand within this report. We can skim over it, nod, then move on. Or, we seek to dig deeper, think harder, speak openly and earnestly about how this information can help the Bendigo Yacht Club prosper. We were both taken by the honesty and desire of all who responded to this survey. There is great will to make the Club an inclusive, friendly, safe place for families and others. And, it already is for many.

We thank all who gave their time and thoughts in participation.

Dr Sandra Tunley

Assoc. Prof. Peter Martin