

The Capital

Neighborhoods

Blessing of the Fleet festival returns

BY DEBBIE HOUGH, For The Capital

Banners about town are announcing Saturday's annual Blessing of the Fleet festival at Discovery Village in Shady Side.

"The good news is that it seems we are going to get a break in the weather," said Adam Hewison of Discovery Village.

In bygone days, fleet blessings were common, and Mr. Hewison resurrected the event five years ago to restore the maritime tradition. Parrish Creek is among the busiest harbors for watermen on the bay's western shore, and about 30 workboats will parade through the creek, passing under a 200-foot arc of water while being blessed for safe passage and a bountiful harvest.

The boat blessing is at 2 p.m., and easy to watch from the shoreline. The festival opens at 10:30 a.m. and admission is free. After a flag-raising ceremony at noon, the popular anchor-tossing competition starts at 12:30 p.m.

At 3 p.m., watermen will vie for trophies and bragging rights by speed-docking their workboats into a small slip, and at 4:30 p.m. the winners will be announced and trophies awarded. Stadium-style seating is available along the dockside.

Organizers said that the winner of this 'friendly and fiercely competitive' waterman's sport was decided by only .08 of a second last year. They said that spectators can anticipate an adrenalin-surged afternoon and more thrilling moments this year as the professional captains adroitly maneuver their boats, making docking appear much simpler than it is.

'We welcome everyone to come, and we are looking forward again to having a great bunch of people get together for this nice community event,' said Mr. Hewison.

Besides the scheduled events, the day will be packed with fun for all ages, including music by Good Deale Bluegrass musicians, and performances by the Shady Side Sour Notes and Riverside Drive.

The festival has steadily evolved into a waterside seafood festival as well. More than 40 vendors will be selling food and wares of all sorts, and the many offerings include South County crabs, soft-shell crabs and homemade crab cakes. There will also be face-painting, kids' games, blacksmith demonstrations, and fishing and oyster displays.

'One big thing, new this year, is a free raffle drawing every 15 minutes, and the prizes are really cool,' said Mr. Hewison.

Mr. Hewison said that free raffle tickets will be distributed at the festival's central tent to each attendee. Prizes include \$50 gasoline cards, restaurant certificates and bottles of wine.

If you aren't a waterman, there will be plenty of chances to get out on the water on various sorts of vessels, including arrival by boat. Coming to the festival on your own watercraft is discouraged, Mr. Hewison said, 'because there is just too much boat traffic that day, and there will be kayaks in the water to keep watch for also.' The limited parking at Discovery Village is reserved for handicapped only.

For arrival by water, organizers suggest a free boat shuttle departing regularly from Clarks Landing in Shady Side, where parking is ample. You can abandon your car, board a beautiful Triton or Monterey and ferry to the festival just minutes away. Landlubbers can opt to board buses instead, also at Clarks Landing, that will shuttle to and from the festival all day.

At the festival, 45-minute excursions on the majestic skipjack

H.M. Krentz or the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Stanley Norman will be available on a first-come, first-served basis for \$10 per adult and \$5 for children younger than 12. Trips limited to 32 passengers will depart every hour.

The recently restored bay workboat Miss Edith is featured in a raffle of \$1 chances to win a two-hour cruise aboard the historic vessel for 20 people, redeemable at a later date.

'That's a very exciting opportunity, because she is such a beautiful boat,' said Mr. Hewison. The Miss Edith cruise prize comes complete with a captain and first mate.

Along with the free boat trips to the festival, another free way into the water is by kayak. Discovery Village will loan out six double kayaks for paddling around Turtle Cove, bordering the quieter side of the festival grounds.

'Just show up and put your name on a wait list, and the kayaks should rotate back for reuse pretty quickly,' said Mr. Hewison, who also welcomes participants to bring and launch their own kayaks there.

One sight visible from shore as well as the water are three osprey chicks nested on a pedestal atop the No. 5 creek channel marker. Kids can watch the same chicks later, when they get home from the festival, by checking out the live Web cam monitoring the nest at www.discoveryvillage.net. That site also has full information about the festival, or call 410-867-7737.

Admission and parking are free, and the Blessing of the Fleet festival runs from 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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