

MARINE INDUSTRY

Taxes a big issue at summit

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■ The eighth-annual Marine Summit in Fort Lauderdale focused on issues ranging from taxes to water access.

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Leaders in the marine industry from four South Florida counties teamed up for the first time Wednesday to tackle some of the biggest issues facing the business.

The eighth-annual Marine Summit in Fort Lauderdale had lawmakers and marine executives from Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade and Monroe counties focused on finding solutions to problems involving water access, labor shortages, insurance and taxes. About 200 people split up into groups to create goals for tackling these issues.

Property taxes were a hot topic with many crying foul over how county property appraisers differed greatly in judging the value of marine property. Complaints were especially vocal from Palm Beach representatives, saying that county-wide taxes on working waterfronts spiked from \$3 million in 2005 to \$7.8 million this year.

"Property taxes, if not now, will eventually put people out of business," said Raymond Graziotto, who lead the discussion on taxes. Those who met with Graziotto, the president and chief operating officer of Seven Kings Holdings in Jupiter, were burning at the effects taxes have had on the industry. Broward County Property Appraiser Lori Parish offered suggestions to help the passionate crowd.

The group concluded that the industry needs to push for a cap on taxes and have Florida lawmakers make a constitutional change in policy for the marine industry.

"Perhaps the legislators don't really know what's going on," Graziotto said, adding that counties tax small-marina owners as if they are high-rises. "They tax us at a level we can't afford to pay."

The summit also is establishing a plan to reach out to the younger community, encouraging members to get a job in the region's multibillion dollar marine industry. Solutions included partnerships with Broward Community College to improve recruiting and helping firms offer better wages for younger employees.

Counties named numerous challenges in the issue of improving water access, including a lack of boat slips in Broward and Miami-Dade's need for more funding to dredge the Miami River. Another focus group insisted on better standards for boaters insurance and additional funding for hurricane aid. Those at the summit vowed to strengthen their voice about the issues to get more exposure on a state level to find existing or potential funding.