

# Dunedin mayor fell months behind in city boat slip fees

By [Megan Reeves](#), *Times Staff Writer*



Mayor Julie Ward Bujalski said her family struggled with bills.

DUNEDIN — Mayor Julie Ward Bujalski and her husband, Tom, fell months behind in payments for their boat slip at the city-owned marina, owing as much as \$2,800 in back payments and fines as recently as April. Though they made occasional payments since then, they never caught up until this week, a day after the *Tampa Bay Times* requested marina records from the city.

According to the agreement they signed in 2012, boats parked in slips with fees more than 60 days late can be removed, towed and stored elsewhere by the city staff, who can then bill the owner for the cost of the move. But the mayor's boat stayed put.

Despite the lengthy record of late fees, her 28-foot 1986 Carver Mariner, a model commonly listed around \$15,000, never left the water. Instead, the city staff came up with a unique payment plan for the Bujalskis so they could keep their slip, which costs \$251 a month, and pay off the balance over six months.

The mayor says the payments were late because of her family's recent financial trouble after her husband, who she said is the "primary breadwinner" as a construction business owner, fell and broke his foot. She declined to say when her husband was injured, but said other health issues he had before that also kept him from working for some time.

"We struggled to pay some of our bills," she said, calling the unpaid fees a "temporary situation" she and her husband thought they could fix by working with the city. "Every day, Dunedin residents have financial difficulties here and there, and we have like anybody else."

But records show their account — often left unpaid for several months and once as many as eight — has been penalized for late payments for more than four years, nearly every month since the Bujalskis rented the space.

Bujalski said her husband went to the city a few weeks ago to work out a payment plan — something parks and recreation director Vince Gizzi admitted has never been done for someone with late boat slip fees in his nine years working at the city.

"We have had boats that had been delinquent further than what our mayor's were, but most of that was people that had abandoned their boats. We haven't had anyone (with fees that high) that still wanted their boat," he said. "We have put people with (late) utility bills on payment plans, but not for the marina. ... We haven't had this particular issue."

Bujalski, who makes \$10,000 annually as mayor, said she has no idea if the city has ever come up with a payment plan for delinquent marina fees, but hopes it would because the city "tries to work with our residents."

"All I can tell you is that most people can call their electric company or call about their water bill and usually businesses work with you," she said. "It probably hasn't happened at the marina because most people in the marina have money — lots of money."

Recently hired finance director Joe Ciurro, who was asked by the parks and recreation department to design the payment plan for the Bujalskis, said he has never done so for a marina account during his seven months with the city. He confirmed three- to six-month payment plans have been used for utility customers in "extenuating circumstances," and said that while the necessity of utilities is different from that of a marina slip, he did only what he was directed to do by the parks and recreation department.

"We made sure that if we were going to do something like this (for the Bujalskis), we should be in line with what we do for utility customers," he said. "We made sure we didn't go beyond six months."

The mayor said her husband was "trying to do the honorable thing to make things whole" when he went to the city to work out a plan while he tried to find work. Records show the Bujalskis made their first scheduled payment July 19 — nearly three weeks past the due date — before paying off the account this week.

Bujalski said the full amount wasn't paid to quiet criticisms, but because her husband landed some contracts at work.

"It really is a personal and private matter, and I think Dunedin residents will understand that," she said. "It is sad that during a heightened political situation that the focus will come upon an everyday family's struggles."

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