LACONIA — Winnisquam Marine, the largest pontoon boat dealer east of Illinois, now has a highly visible second location at the former Channel Marine property on the Weirs Channel, and owner Ed Crawford says he couldn't be happier with how things have worked out for him and his family.

He has moved his office to the new location and said he likes what he sees this summer in terms of boat traffic through the channel and the business generated at the new location.

"It's been crazy busy here in recent weeks and there are so many people stopping at our gas dock that it's been impossible to hold to our schedule of closing at 7 p.m. I wouldn't be surprised if we end up with more gas sales than any other place on the lake," Crawford said.

He said he has more than 100 valet service boats stored at the facility and that on July 4 half of them were put into the lake for his customers, making it one of the busiest days he's ever seen.

In addition there are 20 rental boats and demand has also been high from people who want to get out on the lake, especially on the hot and humid days the Lakes Region has experienced so far in July.

Crawford said the acquisition gives him and his family more boat storage space, more valet capability, more service and rental capacity and, for the first time, a presence on Lake Winnipesaukee.

Channel Marine covers nearly four-and-a-half acres, and includes 34 boat slips on a building with room for 150 boats and space to store 500 boats. It was founded by Bill Littlefield in 1946, and sold wooden GarWood boats. Bill Littlefield bought the business from Vin Callahan in 1949, and sold it to Bill Littlefield in 1969.
2000 sold to Vin Mullarkey and Doug Hammond, who last year sold it to Crawford.

One of the first things Crawford did was to refurbish the area off from the gas dock, creating a convenience store where food and snacks, along with beer and wine and marine gear and paraphernalia are sold. The business has been renamed Winnisquam Marine on Winnipesaukee.

Crawford founded Winnisquam Marine in 1977 near Mosquito Bridge that crosses the channel on Lake Winnisquam. Today, he works hand-in-glove with family, including his wife, Sheila, who serves as office manager; daughter, Julie Marsh, executive director, and son, Ryan Crawford, vice president.

Crawford grew up in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and summered with his family on Lake Winnisquam before moving to the Lakes Region.

In the 1970s he was the top boat driver in the Lake Winnisquam Water Ski Club, retiring the Gil Charland Trophy for boat drivers after winning it for three straight years.

He was a biology major at New England College in Henniker, where he graduated in 1976, studying among other things, freshwater biology.

He said that in the early years he rented, leased and then eventually bought the property where Winnisquam Marine is located and rapidly changed his emphasis on boat sales from water-ski style boats to more family friendly boats.

“We recognized early on that there was a need for family style boats for people just getting into boating and made no-pressure sales and good customer service our top priority,” said Crawford.

He said Winnisquam Marine was one of the first to recognize the growing popularity of pontoon boats and started ordering more of them around the year 2000, to cater to the growing market.

Crawford says Winnisquam Marine sells between 300 and 400 boats a year, more than 60 percent of which are Bennington pontoon boats.

He says pontoon boats have evolved over the years from slow-moving “party boats” with a top speed of 15 miles per hour into performance boats capable of towing water skiers and hitting 45 miles per hour.

The newer triple pontoon boats also have more stability in rough water, allowing them to deliver performance similar to that of fiberglass stern drive boats.

Winnisquam Marine also sells Bayliner and Crownline brands and Crawford likens them to well-known auto brands with Bayliner being the Chevrolet and Crownline the Cadillac.

He said Bayliners are popular with first-time boat buyers and start at around $16,000, while Crownline boats range from $40,000 to $80,000.

“We’ve got a location now where we can provide service for bigger boats without people having to pull them out of Winnipesaukee. That’s a big plus for us,” Crawford said.

He said there are five marine technicians working at the Weirs Channel location and another 13 working at the Winnisquam location.
“We think our sales philosophy will work well here. We've had increases of 20 to 30 percent in the past few years and we're looking to build on that and continue to grow,” Crawford said.