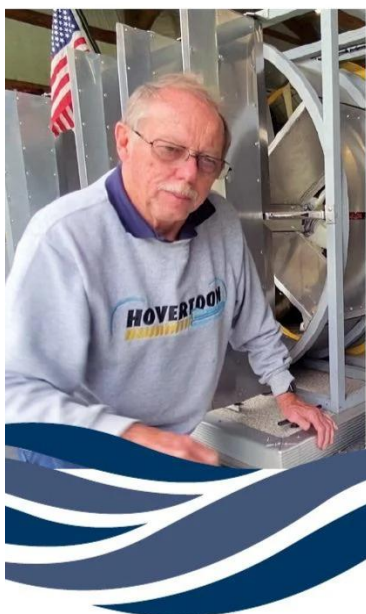




Rocking the boat



Dick Schramer took his first ride on a hovercraft in 2007. It was an experience the former mayor of Berlin found exhilarating and one he dreamed of duplicating on his own pontoon.

After that, “the race was on,” says Schramer, who immediately started designing what would become his award-winning amphibious vehicle, the Hovertoon, despite never having actually driven a hovercraft himself.

“It’s out-of-the-box thinking without being in the box in the first place,” says Schramer, a retired electrical engineer. “I didn’t have any preconceived notions on how something should be built or how it should work.”

The hovercraft-pontoon hybrid is built on a 22-foot pontoon chassis, but its secret lies in its patented rotating pontoons. These pontoons rotate about 135 degrees on the outside edge, gaining the craft roughly 50% more surface area and providing more lift than a conventional hovercraft with a fixed footprint.

The Hovertoon, which earned People’s Choice at the 2024 Wisconsin Innovation Awards, can be transported with a standard pontoon trailer and deploys seamlessly from water to land and even snow or ice.

“The transition from land to water is imperceptible,” Schramer says. “You don’t have to worry about obstacles under the water, even sandbars. You just go right over the top of them.”

Beyond recreation, Schramer sees his invention as a game-changer for disaster response.

Most rescue hovercrafts currently on the market have to be small enough to fit on a flat trailer, Schramer says, which means they require multiple trips to transport people and supplies. The Hovertoon, by contrast, can carry up to 2,000 pounds of passengers and gear, making it ideal for search-and-rescue operations in flood zones or on frozen waters where traditional boats struggle.

Schramer is currently working on adding a ramp system that unfolds from inside the pontoon. He hopes to partner with an investor or boat manufacturer to bring the Hovertoon to market.

“Any pontoon manufacturer could easily convert their operation to build these,” he says. “It’s probably 80% pontoon boat, and the rest are standard hovercraft parts.”

— Amelia Compton Wolff