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Lake residents worry about Oakland County patrol cuts

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Marilyn and Chuck Svaluto discourage friends and family from visiting their lakefront home on Oakland County's Cass Lake on summer weekends. This summer, they might just say: Forget it.

They love to share their good fortune and Keego Harbor lifestyle, but on hot, sunny weekends, the idyllic lakefront becomes a nightmare of buzzing jet skis and speedboats, and booze-drenched bashes at Party Harbor, a sandbar that turns into a floating bacchanal of anchored craft.

• 2 p.m. chat

This summer could be even worse, because regular patrols by the Oakland County Sheriff's Office are scheduled to end on Cass Lake and at least 23 other popular lakes, scuttled by a budget crisis facing hundreds of Michigan communities.

With 450 named lakes, Oakland County is metro Detroit's inland boating capital.

"As soon as those clowns find out patrols are

going to be reduced, all hell is going to break loose," Marilyn Svaluto said. "I won't care if it's 85 degrees on the Fourth of July. My feet will be on the shore."

The Sheriff's Office is offering an option: If lakefront communities pay \$32 an hour, the county will maintain patrols.

Paying for patrols

In the mid-1960s, when the patrols started, jet skis didn't exist and much lakefront development was yet to come.

Now, hot summer weekends find the lakes buzzing, filled with jet skis, pontoons, kayaks and speedboats, all vying for a little piece of paradise.

The county's general fund -- fueled by state boat-license fees and by property tax revenues from all the county's homeowners -- has paid the tab for patrols for years. But the Sheriff's Office had to cut \$13.3 million from its \$130-million budget this year, and all but two of the department's 24 boats will stay in dry dock.

So now, if the lakeside communities want the patrols to continue, they will have to pay.

The Sheriff's Office said that, for \$32 an hour, it will continue to patrol the lakes. The plan was detailed Wednesday night to residents in four communities -- Orchard Lake, West Bloomfield, Keego Harbor and Waterford -- that have direct access to the county's biggest and busiest

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waterway: Cass Lake, which turns into a gas-fueled speed fest and huge floating party on summer weekends.

"If you see a presence on the lake, it deters misbehavior," said Marilyn Svaluto, who has lived on Cass Lake in Keego Harbor since 1964. "We need them on busy weekends or it's not going to be pretty."

The Sheriff's Office said it chose cuts affecting the least number of people.

"In these tough economic times, it's tough to justify using tax dollars for this," said Undersheriff Mike McCabe.

So the marine division will go from four full-time deputies, a sergeant and 50 part-time deputies to one full-time sergeant and about 20 part-timers, who will travel the county, trailering two small, speedy boats and responding to incidents on the lakes. The dive unit, which does search and rescue in the county's 450 named lakes, will remain.

Some communities already have decided to pay for the patrols.

Addison Township, in northern Oakland, will pay \$4,100 for patrols on Lakeville Lake. "We know how important the patrols are," said township Supervisor Bruce Pearson. "But I don't know what the answer is going to be next year. I've already posed the question to the homeowners on the lake. Next year, they may have to pass the hat."

Waterford, home to several of the county's busiest lakes, won't pay for patrols.

"We'd be using general fund money that wouldn't benefit all the residents," said township Supervisor Carl Solden. "Why would somebody want their money going into something that they can't enjoy?"

Neither Wayne nor Macomb county expects much change in its marine patrols this year, but

neither county has anything near the number of inland lakes as Oakland.

Macomb County patrols Lake St. Clair, using four full-time deputies and about 100 reservists, who work as volunteers. "We're always looking at our budget and expenses," said Capt. Tony Wickersham. "We'll be taking a look at it on a weekly basis."

Wayne County got a federal homeland security grant last year for four additional full-time deputies to patrol the Detroit River and bridge crossings between Detroit and Windsor.

The county also now is using money from a parks millage, instead of its general fund, to pay for four other full-time marine deputies, who patrol the Detroit River and the lower end of Lake St. Clair and Belleville Lake.

The current budget crunch may reduce that number to three, and the county hopes the federal grant is renewed this year, said Sue Hall, director of administration for the department. "Hopefully, our patrols won't be affected at all this year," she said. "We'll just have to wait and see."

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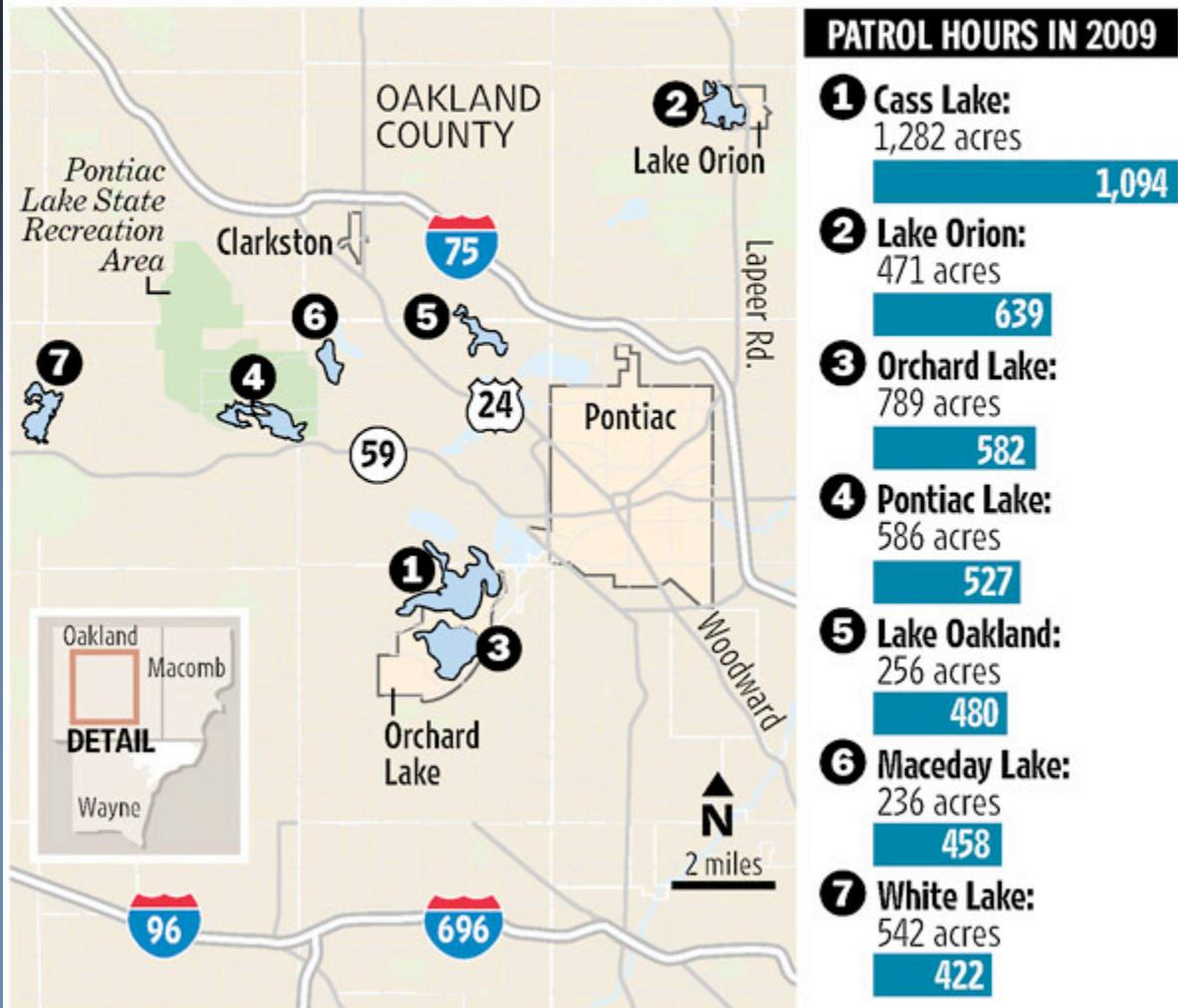
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Oakland County's seven most patrolled lakes

Budget problems may limit the Oakland County Sheriff's Office from patrolling the largest and most popular lakes in Oakland County. These are the seven lakes that saw the most patrol hours in 2009 from the Sheriff's Office.



Source: Oakland County Sheriff's Office

MARTHA THIERRY/Detroit Free Press