

News > Local News

## Who will patrol area lakes?

Sunday, June 6, 2010

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Of The Oakland Press

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Two Oakland County residents were among at the least seven people killed statewide in water accidents during Memorial Day weekend.

As the boating season ramps up, lake safety is on the minds of many people, yet budget cutbacks have forced the Oakland County Sheriff's Office to stop patrolling the two-dozen busiest lakes in the county at no cost to local municipalities.

A handful of communities have inked contracts with the Sheriff's Office for individual lakes. In other places, such as Waterford Township, there are no sheriff's marine patrols planned.

Meanwhile, legislation is pending that officials hope could lead to an increase in the amount of money that the county gets from boat registration fees to help pay for marine patrols.

"I live right across the street from Cass Lake," said Oakland County Commissioner John Scott, R-Waterford Township. "We're all concerned as to what's going to happen this summer.

"The presence of the sheriff on Cass Lake, for instance, acts as a deterrent for people doing the wrong thing on the water."

### Tough budgetary times

Largely because of a decline in property tax revenue, elected officials who head up Oakland County's various departments have had to reduce their budgets by specific amounts, called budget tasks.

The Oakland County Sheriff's Office's budget, which is now about \$118 million, has been reduced by more than \$13 million since late 2008. As a result, some programs and services have been scaled back. The department has lost about 130 positions overall.

County administration officials recently gave the office additional budget tasks of \$2 million for each of the next three years, beginning with the fiscal year that starts this October.

Dale Cunningham, business manager for the Oakland County Sheriff's Office, said the sheriff's Marine Division used to have a sergeant, four full-time deputies, 45 part-time deputies and about 30 boats. Two full-time deputies were cut around 2002.

Cunningham said the staffing level remained the same since then until recently, when the division was reduced to one sergeant and 10 part-time deputies.

Two, two-deputy teams with patrol units pulling jump boats still will be available to respond to calls throughout the county. Officials also stress that there will be no changes to the dive team.

But communities that want to have a regular sheriff's marine patrol, which many people see as a valuable preventative measure, will have to pay for it.

"We recognize that us being out there (on the lakes) prevents a certain amount," of bad behavior, said Oakland County Sheriff's Maj. Robert Smith, "but we have to work within the budgeted dollars we have in these trying economic times."

About \$1.4 million used to be spent to fund the Marine Division, a number that includes money from the general fund and roughly \$240,000 from state watercraft registrations. Because of cutbacks, now only \$40,000 will be used on top of the registration money for the Marine Division.

Some local officials say the formula the state uses to determine how boat registration money is distributed is a mystery, and they believe that lake-rich Oakland County should get more of it.

State Rep. Eileen Kowall, R-White Lake, has introduced legislation that she says would require the state's Department of Natural Resources and Environment to annually disburse 49 percent of all watercraft registration fees collected in the previous year to participating counties.

A formula would be created for distribution that would be based on several factors, including the number of boats registered in the county and the number of marine calls handled by law enforcement.

"Given the density of our population and the lakes we have," Kowall said, "it's a huge public safety issue."

Mary Dettloff, a spokeswoman for the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, said the formula used now for distributing the money is transparent and based on factors that include the amount of water in an area and the number of sheriff's officers on marine duty.

Dettloff said under the formula in Kowall's legislation, "all the money goes to Southeast Michigan." She said just because a person registers a boat in an area doesn't mean they do all their boating there.

"We don't think that's fair because boating occurs all over the state," she said.

#### Local contracts

In light of the budget challenges, the Sheriff's Office offered municipalities last year the option of contracting for marine patrols at the rate of \$32 an hour for a deputy with a boat.

Contracts have been finalized in the last several weeks with Addison Township for Lakeville Lake; Orion Township for Lake Orion and Voorheis lakes; Commerce Township for Upper Straits Lake, Commerce Lake, Lake Sherwood and Lower Straits Lake; and Wolverine Lake and Orchard Lake for the lakes with the same names.

Cunningham said a contract is expected to be finalized with West Bloomfield Township for Pine Lake. He also said proposed contracts have been sent out to Highland Township for White Lake and White Lake Township for Pontiac Lake.

While Orion and Addison townships are using tax dollars to pay for the patrols in their communities, residents in other areas are footing the bill. For instance, the patrol on Orchard Lake will be funded by property owners in a special assessment district.

In West Bloomfield Township, members of the Pine Lake Property Owners Association were close to entering into an agreement when concerns were raised over the potential liability of homeowners. Supervisor Michele Economou Ureste said she recently met with sheriff's officials, and the contract was changed to address the liability issues. The township board is expected to approve the contract at its meeting Monday.

Economou Ureste said Walnut Lake property owners also have expressed interest in marine patrols.

Cass Lake — which is bordered by West Bloomfield and Waterford townships, Keego Harbor and Orchard Lake — has no dedicated sheriff's patrols lined up. The fire departments in West Bloomfield and Waterford each have one boat for water rescue, but those boats don't patrol.

Waterford Township Supervisor Carl Solden said the township is not looking at entering into a marine patrol contract with the Sheriff's Office.

"The money just isn't there," he said

The Keego Harbor Police Department has one patrol boat for the shoreline area of Cass Lake in that community, a jurisdiction that includes a long sandbar that draws partiers on holidays and weekends.

Police Chief Kenneth Hurst said the boat is authorized to travel beyond Keego Harbor's portion of the lake in the case of a serious emergency.

Cass Lake really needs the Sheriff's Office patrols, he said.

"A majority of that lake is wide open," he said. "I envision all kinds of problems there without the sheriff."

The Department of Natural Resources and Environment has two conservation officers assigned to Oakland County who conduct marine patrols but also have a number of other duties, such as enforcing wildlife laws.

Lea Van Renterghem, a director of the Pine Lake Property Owners Association, said other local lake communities that are considering contracting for marine patrols are looking to Pine Lake to see how it works out there.

Even in tight budget times, she said lake safety remains a high-priority issue for many people.

"It's our primary concern," she said.

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