

Lawmaker seeks more money for marine patrols

by Brooke Meier

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A local state representative plans to introduce legislation in the hope of bolstering funding for county marine patrols during summer months.

State Rep. Eileen Kowall (R-Highland, White Lake) said her legislation is aimed at tightening up the law that dictates how money from boat registration fees is divvied up among the state's 83 counties.

Oakland County Undersheriff Mike McCabe said a lack of state funding has hampered the Oakland County Sheriff's Department Marine Division efforts to patrol area lakes.

This year will be the first in recent memory that Oakland County deputies won't patrol area lakes on a regular basis. Municipalities and homeowner associations can still contract with the department for lake patrols for \$32 an hour, but the practice of docking Marine Division patrol boats on more than two dozen county lakes for regular patrols throughout the summer has come to an end due to budget constraints.

According to McCabe, what Oakland County receives back from the state in boat registration fees is a small portion of what Oakland County boat owners send to the state in registration fees.

"Oakland County gets the short end of the stick on marine safety funds from the state," he said. "We have the most registered boats in the state and we get back about 25 cents to the dollar on what we send to the state (in boat registration fees). The problem is the state Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) has no set formula on how they dole this money out — they just get to decide, and there's no rhyme or reason to it."

"What this legislation is aimed at doing is providing more transparency in how the state spends the money from boat registrations," Kowall said. "It's to tighten up language in Public Act 451 as to how boat registration money is dispersed. Forty-nine percent of the money is supposed to go to marine safety divisions in the state, and that really hasn't been happening. The existing language is loose enough that the DNRE has been able to sidestep and not send the full amount of money to marine divisions that they should be sending."

For Oakland County, Kowall said this correction could mean the reinstatement of regular marine patrols on county lakes.

"We don't want to go back to the days when we didn't have marine safety divisions," Kowall said. "We were basically recovering bodies from the lakes — this is a safety issue for people out on the lakes during the summer. I was hoping to get the funding fixed for 2010, and if I can't, then certainly we can move to get it fixed for 2011."

Kowall has yet to introduce her legislation.