

Counties must get fair share of boat registration fee revenues

April 21, 2010

State Rep. Eileen Kowall (R-Highland, White Lake) intends to introduce a bill that could result in more state funding being forwarded to the Oakland County Sheriff's Department Marine Division to cover the cost of patrols on the county's inland lakes. Sheriff's Department officials have lamented for years that the Marine Division doesn't get a fair shake from the state when it comes to funding for marine patrols. That, and other budget constraints, have forced the Marine Division to suspend regular marine patrols on county lakes. Anything Kowall and her colleagues in the Legislature can do to help pay for marine patrols would be a big benefit to not only the Marine Division, but the county's riparians and others who use Oakland's waterways.

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

Oakland County has more registered boats than any other county in the state, at an estimated 98,000 vessels. McCabe said the Marine Division gets about 25 cents back for each dollar county boat owners send to the state through registration fees. He said the department typically gets about \$230,000 a year in boat registration fee revenue.

This year will be the first in recent memory that Oakland County deputies won't patrol area lakes on a regular basis. Although 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, municipalities can still contract with the department for lake patrols at the rate of \$32 an hour.

Kowall said she plans to introduce a bill aimed at tightening up the law that dictates how boat registration fee revenue is divvied up among the state's counties. According to Kowall, Michigan counties are supposed to share 49 percent of the revenue from boat registration fees. She said existing statutory language and administrative guidelines are loose enough that the state Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) is able to shortchange the counties and use money that should go toward marine patrols for various other department programs and needs.

Kowall, who has yet to have the legislation drafted, said her intent is to introduce a bill that would require the DNRE to forward at least 49 percent of boat registration fee revenue to counties. If enacted, she said the bill could result in the reinstatement of regular Marine Division patrols on Oakland County lakes.

In addition, she said the legislation would require the state to annually report how much boat registration fee money is generated by each county, and how much funding is allocated back to each county.

The concept behind Kowall's pending legislation merits support. Requiring the state to report exactly how much boat registration fee money comes from each county, and how much is sent back, would definitely add a measure of transparency on this issue. We can't imagine hearing arguments against that, other than such reporting may incur a minor cost, which could be reasonably covered by a mere fraction of registration fee revenue.

More importantly, the notion of making sure the state redistributes at least 49 percent of boat registration fee revenue to counties for marine patrols is entirely appropriate. While we haven't always been supportive of the concept of earmarks, this is a case where it's essential that counties get a fair share of boat registration fees to help monitor activities on the waterways.

This is particularly critical for Oakland County, which not only has more registered boats than any other county in Michigan, but also one of the largest number of inland lakes.

We fear that the suspension of regular marine patrols in Oakland County will strike a big blow to public safety. We fully expect there will be some on the water this summer who will take advantage of the absence of Marine Division deputies, which doesn't bode well for the safe, orderly use of county lakes. If that prediction proves accurate, that could have a noticeable negative impact on riparians' quality of life, and could jeopardize all who use Oakland's lakes.

Anything Kowall and other area lawmakers can do to ensure or bolster funding for marine patrols — even if it only results in lowering the hourly rate the Marine Division must charge for patrols — would be a benefit across the county.