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Marine Division charging \$32 an hour for patrols

Brooke Meier

May 13, 2010 - Due to budget constraints and a slow economy, Oakland County municipalities abundant with lakes will have to either rely on their own police or fire personnel to conduct lake patrols this year, have no lake patrols at all, or contract with the Oakland County Sheriff's Department for marine patrols at the rate of \$32 an hour.

The practice of keeping Oakland County Sheriff's Department Marine Division patrol boats on more than two dozen county lakes was ended after the 2009 boating season, because the money simply isn't there to continue the practice.

"We cut \$13.3 million out of our budget and eliminated 127 deputy positions," said Undersheriff Mike McCabe. "The bottom line is, the sheriff (Mike Bouchard) made the decision to make cuts. We've eliminated a helicopter and two pilots, we've eliminated bed capacity in the corrections system, we've eliminated investigators — we've cut \$13.3 million out of our budget, and you don't do that without making cuts to services."

McCabe said the department takes the money it gets from the state and has to divide it among the many services it provides.

"Marine patrols won't be completely eliminated, but we are going to operate a bit differently — like most other sheriff's offices in the state do — with what the state gives us."

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

"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. 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 is no rhyme or reason to it."

Oakland County Commissioner Shelley Goodman Taub (R-Bloomfield Township) said Oakland County has 450 lakes and approximately 90,000 registered boats — more than any other county in the state. In previous years, the county has spent \$1.2 million to \$1.4 million on Marine Division patrols on various county lakes.

"It's our contention that we are doing the vast majority of the work, but the DNRE is disproportionately taking the amount of law enforcement dollars meant for the sheriff's department," McCabe said. "We are going to do our best to get it changed. It's another example of sending our money off to Lansing and not getting back, at least a fair portion, of what we send up there."

In late March, Taub, along with Oakland County Commissioner John A. Scott (R-Waterford), held a forum for officials and riparians in communities surrounding Cass Lake to discuss the alternatives to the Marine Division's traditional lake patrols. The communities of Keego Harbor, Waterford, West Bloomfield and Orchard Lake Village surround Cass Lake.

"We just don't have that money anymore, and we can only support a dive/rescue team," Taub said of the Marine Division. "I suggested that each of the police department representatives for the four communities take back the information from the forum to their communities and decide whether they want to contract with the county for marine patrols, or pursue a different option."

At its height, the Marine Division and its Water Rescue Unit was equipped with 27 boats, two jump boats, a hovercraft, four all-terrain vehicles and four snowmobiles for use by full- and part-time deputies.

In 2009, the Marine Division kept patrol boats on the following Oakland County lakes for regular patrols during the boating season:

- Cass Lake in Waterford and West Bloomfield townships, Keego Harbor and Orchard Lake Village;
- North and South Commerce lakes in Commerce Township;
- Deer Lake in Independence Township and Clarkston;
- Duck Lake in Highland Township;
- Elizabeth Lake in Waterford Township;
- Lakeville Lake in Addison Township;
- Loon Lake in Waterford Township;
- Lower Straits Lake in Commerce Township;
- Maceday Lake in Waterford Township;
- Middle Straits Lake in Commerce and West Bloomfield townships;
- Lake Oakland in Waterford and Independence townships;
- Orchard Lake in Orchard Lake Village;
- Lake Orion in Lake Orion and Orion Township;
- Pine Lake in West Bloomfield Township;
- Pontiac Lake in Waterford and White Lake townships;
- Lake Sherwood in Commerce Township;
- Sylvan Lake in Sylvan Lake, Pontiac and Waterford Township;
- Union Lake in Commerce and West Bloomfield townships;
- Voorheis Lake in Orion Township;
- Walled Lake in Walled Lake and Novi;
- Walnut Lake in West Bloomfield Township;
- Watkins Lake in Waterford Township;
- White Lake in White Lake and Highland townships;
- Williams Lake in Waterford Township; and
- Long Lake in Commerce and White Lake townships.

If municipalities don't act, there will be no marine patrols of any kind on these lakes.

The Marine Division is offering to patrol lakes in Oakland County, including those listed above, for \$32 an hour. That

price would include one deputy and a boat.

For Cass Lake, if the Marine Division were to patrol the same number of hours it has during past summers, the total cost for 2010 patrols would be approximately \$36,000.

West Bloomfield Township officials had discussed using their own police personnel for marine patrols this year; however, Deputy Chief Joe Chapin said following further discussion within the department, that plan has been put on hold.

"We are trying to explore all the options available and decide what works best for our residents," he said. "We have other lakes in the community to think about, as well. West Bloomfield only contains a small portion of Cass Lake, and, in the past, we really haven't had any problems."

In Walled Lake, the City Council has voted to have marine patrols on Walled Lake on holidays and weekends between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

"Walled Lake is the jewel of the city and a lot of people are concerned since there will no longer be sheriff patrols on the it," said Mayor Pro Tem Linda Ackley. "We want to make sure it's safe for everyone involved."

A city marine officer will patrol the lake between noon and 8 p.m. on weekends and holidays, including Memorial Day, Labor Day, and the Fourth of July. The city of Novi, situated along the southern shore of the lake, isn't doling out any money toward marine patrols.

"I spoke with (Novi Police) Chief (David) Molloy and he isn't interested one way or another, so our primary focus will be on Walled Lake's end of the lake, unless an emergency pops up," said Acting Walled Lake Police Chief Paul Shakinis.

After finishing union negotiations on Tuesday, March 16, the city's marine officer was contracted to be paid \$22 per hour.

Walled Lake created its own Walled Lake/Wolverine Lake Police and Fire Dive Rescue Team, comprised of four police officers and five firefighters, after a man drowned in the lake in 2008. The city's dive team trains throughout the year. All equipment for the team was purchased with drug forfeiture funds, including wet suits, air tanks, and a dive boat.

The Walled Lake City Council has voted to adopt a first reading of a marine and water safety ordinance to align with state regulations and to ensure all citation fees are paid directly to the city.

"We're putting into local ordinance some of the state laws on marine safety so the city can issue a ticket, and the fine fee will come to the city and not the state," said Walled Lake Mayor William Roberts. "The ordinance incorporates the Inland Lakes and Streams Act, as well as marine safety."

The ordinance includes two general features. First, it adopts and incorporates certain provisions of the state marine safety statute regulating boater safety and establishing boater traffic and operation requirements. Secondly, it establishes limited general health, safety and welfare requirements applicable to certain activities and marine structures such as docks and mooring posts.

Moreover, in an effort to avoid potential conflicts with state law, the ordinance adopts and incorporates by reference, definitions of terms set forth in the state's Marine Safety Act and Inland Lakes and Streams Act.

"The ordinance doesn't adopt any regulations that deal with non-residential docking," said City Attorney Vahan Vanerian. "The issue came up last boating season when lakefront property owners allowed non-residents to dock their boats on a seasonal basis. That isn't dealt with in this ordinance."

Orchard Lake officials have made cuts in other areas of the city's budget in order to provide \$10,000 for marine patrols on lakes through a possible contract with the Oakland County Sheriff's department.

At press time, only two county municipalities had officially contracted with the Marine Division for 2010 lake patrols. The first is Addison Township, where the Marine Division has been contracted to patrol Lakeville Lake. The second is Orion Township, where deputies will patrol Lake Orion and Lake Voorheis.

Municipalities or riparians can pay for the contracts however they chose, McCabe said, whether through special assessments or budget appropriations.

"These are contracts with the municipalities," he said. "When you have a lake with multiple jurisdictions like Cass Lake, we would probably contract with one of those municipalities."

The Marine Division will keep two jump boats on hand and transition from its previous proactive patrol status to a more reactive status.

"We will go when we get calls and the jumps boats will respond," McCabe said. "We will have no other dedicated patrols other than on the lakes that will contract with us. We will only have a couple of jump boats out to respond to the entire county. The response time is going to be longer, and there are going to be waits — there's no doubt about it."

The Marine Division's 12-member dive/rescue team, will be unaffected by budget cuts and will operate as it has in past years, according to McCabe. The Marine Division will also continue to train and educate students in boater, snowmobile and hunter safety.

In 2009, several communities throughout Oakland County began to acquire or had already acquired patrol boats or jump boats of their own in preparation for the sheriff's department being unable to patrol lakes this year.

Communities like Bloomfield Township and West Bloomfield have jump boats used by public safety officers in the event of an emergency, but don't patrol the lakes.

In 2008, The Tri-City Fire Commission — representing Keego Harbor, Sylvan Lake, and Orchard Lake Village, which contract with West Bloomfield for fire services — voted to acquire a Seawolf Survivor 1300 rescue boat, after an incident in which two wayward canoers fell into freshly thawed but still chilly waters of Sylvan Lake and needed help.

In addition, the state DNRE has some conservation officers available to patrol lakes, when requested, at no charge.

"Our DNRE conservation officers do a lot of marine patrols," said Lt. David Malloch, a conservation officer with the Southeast Michigan DNRE Office in Southfield. "Last year on Oakland County lakes, our officers patrolled over 1,000 hours. We do do marine patrol."

Malloch said conservation officers look at a number of factors when trying to determine which Oakland County lakes to patrol.

"We look at population and lake usage," he said. "Some of the patrols are complaint-driven, high peak areas."

Different lakes have different peak use levels, according to Malloch. He said some lakes are used more by anglers and others are used more by recreational boaters.

"We want to look at past history of usage and complaints," he said.

The DNRE conservation officers use boats equipped with radar and GPS units when patrolling lakes. On the larger vessels that work the Great Lakes, mapping units are also available.

Lake associations or municipalities can call the DNRE's Southeast Michigan Office to request a DNRE patrol for a busy weekend like the Fourth of July or Memorial Day weekends.

Despite the lack of Oakland County Marine Division patrols this year, Malloch said the DNRE hasn't noticed an increase in requests for conservation officer patrols.

"With the county sheriff's department not having a marine patrol, obviously more marine-related complaints will come to us and it will keep us busier; but as far as requests, they haven't really increased."

To contact the DNRE to request marine patrols, call 248-359-9040.

For more information on contracting with the Oakland County Sheriff's Department for marine patrols, call the department's non-emergency number at 248-858-4911.

[Brooke Meier is a Staff Writer for Oakland Lakefront magazine.](#)



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