

Town told it can do little to muffle watercraft

Written by Carol Pomeday
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DNR says local officials can't limit access to Lake Michigan in effort to give waterfront residents peace and quiet

Town of Belgium lakefront residents upset with the drone of a half dozen or more personal watercrafts jumping waves on Lake Michigan didn't get much hope from Department of Natural Resources officials that the town can regulate the machines.

DNR wardens Mike Clutter of Plymouth and Matt Groppi of Ozaukee County and Kathi Kramasz, DNR water management specialist, were at Tuesday's Town Board meeting to discuss residents' concerns and explain state laws governing boats.

They emphasized that access to Lake Michigan and all navigable waterways is protected by the state. There is little townships can do on their own to limit access or regulate activity on the lake, particularly Lake Michigan.

"Any regulation must be adopted by all municipalities that border the lake," Kramasz said. "That's easy to do on Random Lake, but not on Lake Michigan. There are no border lines out in the water."

There is public access at the end of every Town of Belgium road that stops at the lake. As long as people stay within the 60-foot-wide road right-of-way, they are not violating any laws, Kramasz said.

"Parking is not allowed on the beach. They can drive onto the beach to unload their Jet Skis, but then must move the vehicles," she said.

Residents said no one parks on the beach anymore.

Town Zoning Administrator Charles Parks suggested the town repair the launch ramps at the end of Highway D next to Harrington Beach State Park to encourage people to launch personal watercrafts and boats there.

"Historically, Highway D was the area for launching boats," Parks said. "If we can get them to ride in front of the park, our problems will be solved."

The town used to dredge the area to keep it clear for launching boats and even marked spaces for vehicles to park, Supr. Bill Janeshek said.

State grants are available for developing lake access points, Kramasz said. Highway D is a county road, so Ozaukee County would have to apply for the grant, she said.

Lakefront resident Mike Mierzwa said the Jet Skiers often violate the 200-foot no-wake rule and the distance required between watercrafts when they set up a course in front of his home on Sandy Beach South.

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Clutter said he responded to two complaints about noise from the machines and riders not observing the no-wake rule at Sandy Beach Road, but no one was using the area when he was there.

Parks asked if rangers at Harrington Beach State Park can enforce boating rules if the wardens are not available.

Park rangers can only enforce rules in the state park, Kramasz said.

“There’s only one full-time person now and he’s too busy,” she said.

The wardens have devices that can determine how far a watercraft is from shore and how loud the motor is.

“They are allowed 86 decibels, and that’s pretty loud,” Groppi said. “Call us. We’ll respond. I cover the entire county and I may be in Mequon or in the Village of Belgium.

“Even if we can’t catch them, we can talk to them and let them know we have had complaints and they should knock it off if they’re doing something wrong.”

Town Chairman Francis Kleckner said he was told the situation has gotten better.

Mierzwa said he fears it will get worse again because the waves are getting bigger.

One two-cycle competition machine may not emit more than the decibels allowed, he said, but when six or seven are roaring around a course, the noise is deafening.

“I don’t want to spoil their fun, and I don’t want to be disturbed all night. It happens during the dinner hour when everyone gets home and wants to relax,” Mierzwa said.

“We don’t want to close it off for access. We would like to prohibit them from launching or retrieving from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.”

Kramasz said she will check if the township can regulate the times when crafts can be launched.

Town supervisors declined to do that previously, saying they didn’t want to prevent someone from launching a boat at night to go fishing.

Town Clerk Ginger Murphy said she gets many calls from people who want to know the rules for walking on the beach.

“I get so many complaints from people who say property owners accost them when they’re walking on the beach and dogs are sicced on them,” Murphy said.

People must walk in the water, not just on wet sand, Kramasz said. She left pamphlets that

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explains the state's beach-walking law.