

<http://www.ozaukeeexpress.com/images/042513/waterSM.png> **Hundreds of people hear that message at water safety programs in Port as committee formed after drowning adds life jacket stations to list of projects**

Nearly 500 people attended water safety surf rescue programs in Port Washington last week intended to prevent a repeat of the Labor Day weekend Lake Michigan drowning that left the community grief stricken.

Presented by the nonprofit Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project, the programs were organized by Port Washington's Waterfront Safety Advisory Committee, which was created shortly after 15-year-old Tyler Buczek drowned off the city's north beach on Sept. 2.

In addition to launching an educational campaign, the committee plans a number of lakefront safety improvements — improvements that are now likely to include a life jacket loaner program.

Inspired by the Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project's emphasis on the importance of flotation devices and mention of a program that has been implemented in other communities, the committee contacted the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and has been told that funding is available for a life jacket loaner station in Port, committee member Beckie Perez said.

"The funding is available right now," she said. "All we need to do is jump on this. It's almost too good to be true."



The caveat is that the DNR, which provides life jackets, the materials to build a kiosk-like structure to store the flotation devices and construction plans, requires that the station be built near the launch ramps at the marina, Perez said. The committee intended the stations, which allow people to borrow life jackets while they are near the water, then return them, to be at the entrances to the north and south beaches.

"We would like to go ahead with the station at the marina, then copy the design at the north and south beaches when we're able to raise the money," said Perez, who added the life jacket station at the marina would require city approval.

The life jacket stations would be part of a number of lakefront safety improvements planned by the committee that include dangerous current and informational signs at beach entrances as well as life rings on throw ropes at the two beaches and in Veterans Park. The committee is

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Written by BILL SCHANEN IV

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also planning to place life rings along the harbor's north breakwater.

While many of those improvements are expected to be completed next month, the committee is also working on a second phase of safety measures that includes installing emergency call boxes and video cameras on the north beach that would be supported by a lakefront-area WiFi hotspot. This phase of the project is dependent on fundraising efforts, but the committee hopes to complete it this summer.

"One of the best ways we can honor Tyler and Peter is to make sure this never happens in this community again," Bob Pratt, who is the director of education for the Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project, told a group of about 100 people who attended the presentation at Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Port Washington on April 17. The presentation was part of the Greater Port Washington Kiwanis Club's Week of the Young Child series.

In addition to Tyler Buczek, Pratt was referring to 24-year-old Port Washington resident Peter Dougherty, who drowned while kayaking off Port Washington on March 10, 2012.

Pratt, a retired East Lansing, Mich., paramedic and firefighter who is a certified lifeguard, CPR and first aid instructor, also spoke to about 350 students at Port Washington High School earlier in the day.

"Unfortunately, the reason we are all here is because of tragedy," Pratt said. "We need to somehow find a way to get the entire community involved in water safety. We need to make changes in the way we approach water safety."

The Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project, formed in 2010 in response to an alarming number of drownings in the Great Lakes, has adopted guidelines that stress swimmer education, a safer water environment and safer response to water emergencies.

That starts with knowing your limits as a swimmer, Pratt said.

"Males drown at four times the rate of females. Why? Because we're dumb," he said. "Males can swim about half as far as they think they can."

"It's really important to know your limits and to know the limits of your children."

Noting that people who don't know how to swim can survive between 15 and 45 seconds in water in which they cannot stand, Pratt said drownings often occur before emergency responders reach the scene.

"That's the amount of time you have to intercede, and it's not very long at all," he said.

It's important, Pratt said, to recognize the signs of drowning. A person who is drowning

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typically does not scream or wave their arms. He will usually be upright in the water and may have his head tipped back and mouth open at the water level.

The Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project teaches the flip, float and follow technique. When in trouble in the water, swimmers should flip onto their backs, float and follow the current, rather than swim against it, until they can break free and reach shore or are rescued.

It's important, Pratt said, to understand the various shore currents created by waves in Lake Michigan.

"First of all, undertow is a misnomer," he said. "I used to hear about undertow all the time when I was a kid, but it's an archaic term. There is nothing that will pull you under the water."

But a rip current, for instance, can pull people off shore, Pratt said. A rip current forms when water washed over a sandbar retreats through a break in the sandbar. Swimming perpendicular to this type of current, which dissipates beyond the sandbar, is effective.

Particularly dangerous are structural currents, which form when water is pushed by waves or phenomena such as seiches into breakwaters or piers and create currents that run parallel to the structure.

"You have a really interesting situation here in Port," said Pratt, adding that he would like to work with the committee and University of Wisconsin Sea Grant Institute to map structural currents along Port's waterfront.

"The biggest thing you can do is not panic in the water," Pratt said. "Realize there is no undertow. There is nothing that will pull you down. If you can stay afloat, you can survive."

The Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project will return to Port on Sunday, June 23, for a three-hour program starting at 1 p.m. The classroom portion of the program will be held at the Van Ells-Schanen American Legion Post 82, which is just across Lake Street from Veterans Park and the north beach entrance. The remainder of the program will be held at the beach and in the water. A food stand and water-related information booths will be set up in Veterans Park, Perez said.

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Image Information: JOINING OTHER VOLUNTEERS in the water, Mike Jajtner, a member of the Port Washington Fire Department dive team, jumped into the pool at the Port Washington-Saukville Aquatic Center last week during a water safety presentation by the Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project. Photo by Bill Schanen IV