

County board wades into slow/no wake issue

Changes appear likely to ordinance governing Rock River boat speeds

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JANESVILLE

More than 35 people came to a Rock County Board committee meeting, and each had an opinion about how the Rock River should be managed.

On Monday, the board's public safety and justice committee voted to repeal and re-create parts of the county ordinance regarding slow/no wake orders.

The vote was good news for recreational boaters in the southern part of the county, where water levels would have to be significantly higher before slow/no wake goes into effect.

But a mid-meeting amendment to the proposed changes would mean that the tipping point for slow/no wake could remain the same for boaters north of the Indianford Dam, and not everyone was happy about that.

On Thursday, the proposed changes will go to the county board, and they could be in effect as soon as July 4.

Slow/no wake orders take effect when the river reaches a certain level. When the orders are in effect, boats must go slow enough to create no wakes—the waves that wash out from a boat and onto shore. When water levels are high, wakes can damage piers and cause the banks of the river and the properties along them to erode.

Until 2012, towns were responsible for slow/no wake orders, often creating a confusing patchwork of regulations. Now, the county issues orders that affect the entire length of the river within its borders.

Sheldon Lloyd lives on North Parker Drive in Janesville.

"If you don't live on the river, you don't know what the damage can be like," Lloyd said. "I've lost six feet of shoreline in the time I've lived at my home."

Trent Tinder lives on the river in the town of Beloit. He told the committee that taking care of the shoreline was his responsibility.

"It's part of the 'greens fee' for living on the river," Tinder said. "You have to do what you can to protect it."

Others, however, said slow/no wake orders mean it takes them 90 minutes to get from the area above the Indianford Dam to Newville and the mouth of Lake Koshkonong, and that is simply too long.

The proposed ordinance divides the river into three areas:

From the Beloit-Rock Townline Road bridge south to the state line. Currently, slow/no wake goes into effect when the water reaches 6.5 feet at the U.S. Geological Survey gauge in Afton. Under the ordinance, that level would rise to 8.5 feet.

Mike Lee, owner of Lee Marine in the town of Beloit, said he supports raising the level, as did Tinder, who is his neighbor on the river. The slow/no wake has been hard on business and doesn't make sense in an area where the river is so wide, he said.

From the Beloit-Rock Townline Road bridge north to the Indianford Dam. This area would continue to have a slow/no wake trigger of 6.5 feet level based on the gauge at Afton.

From the Indianford Dam to Newville and the northern county line. The ordinance proposed raising the slow/no wake trigger from 7.5 feet to 8 feet, based on the U.S. Geological Survey gauge in Newville.

This area was the most hotly contested. Committee member Brian Knudson moved to amend the ordinance so the slow/no wake trigger would remain 7.5 feet. The amendment passed, 4-1, with committee Chairman Ivan Collins voting against.

The ordinance changes will go to the county board Thursday night. Collins said he would ask the board to amend its rules so the ordinance changes could go through their first and second readings in one night. That way, the ordinance changes would be in effect for the Fourth of July.

What's next: The Rock County Board will take up the ordinance at its meeting at 6 p.m. Thursday night. A public comment period will be held before the discussion and vote on the ordinances.



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The Rock County Board is considering changes to the slow/no wake designation along the Rock River. Recent rains have done nothing to help the situation.