

Season slipping away?

High water, heavy rains put damper on local boating scene

By Neil Johnson

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NEWVILLE

On Saturday morning, there was nobody on the lake ... nobody on the beach. It was reminiscent of Don Henley's 1980s hit "The Boys of Summer."

On the Rock River at Newville, the boating season is starting to get out of reach this year for boat owners, vacationers and businesses—if the season ever really started at all. Between the heavy rains since May and continuing high water levels on the river since March, it seems Newville's boys of summer might have to wait until next year.

In Newville, steady rains this summer have seemed to wait for the weekends—as if Mother Nature just wants to spoil the boating for everyone. Since April, nine of 12 boating weekends have seen at least one rain day.

One Newville business owner said his riverside bar and grill has seen rains "completely wash out" his regular customer base practically every weekend since Memorial Day.

Just as bad is the perpetual high water levels. Heavy snow runoff and flooding throughout the Rock River basin this spring have kept the river flooded or swollen.

Since March, the river at Newville's Lake Koshkonong measuring gauge has not fallen below 8 feet—the depth which, as of this week, is the county's new trigger for slow/no wake orders on the river at Newville.

That means water skiing and other activities that create a boat wake are not allowed. It has kept many boaters along the river from even putting out their piers. Boaters and business owners say others have hardly left the dock with their boats this year.

Late Saturday morning, Jerry Cox, an Edgerton native who boats on the river, sipped a mixed drink inside Anchor Inn, a Newville Bar along the Rock River.

Cox summed up the boating season this year in two words.

"It sucks," he said.

As more rain pounded down Saturday morning, Cox and his would-be boater buddies drank early lunch cocktails and looked out at the bar's large, grassy veranda along the river. It was empty.

The lone boater on the river was a fisherman in a raincoat camped under the Newville Highway 59 bridge, at the southern mouth of Lake Koshkonong to escape the rain. The water there was so high that the fisherman could have hit the bridge's deck with the top of his fishing pole.

May flooding raised water levels near Newville to above 12 feet in spots, water levels had begun to ease back to normal.

Anchor Inn owner John Kinnett said boaters and businesses the last couple of weeks had been getting their hopes up that the river would drop in time for a good boating weekend for the Fourth of July.

“It almost got down to 8 feet—beneath slow/no wake,” he said.

But then, rain and runoff in the last two weeks raised the river. Over the weekend, it hit 9.9 feet—near flood stage, and nearly two feet above the county’s trigger for slow/no wake orders.

High water levels from lakes Waubesa and Monona south to the Rock River in Rockford, Ill., have prompted emergency slow/no-wake orders, and that has curtailed boating throughout the region.

In Newville, it is hurting businesses that rely on boating traffic on the Rock River and Lake Koshkonong.

“The water has just hung this year at this annoying level,” said Mark Richardson, sales manager at Harbor Recreation, a Marina at Newville. “People can’t get their boats in. Public slips might not be open. They can’t get their docks in, or they want to put them in and they float off. Now they’re taking their docks out. That’s life on the river, but it’s really affecting (business) people right now.”

Sunday’s weather was better, mostly sunny and calm in the afternoon. At the Anchor Inn, an afternoon crowd of about 150 people filled the Anchor Inn veranda. The parking lot was packed with people putting in boats.

After Saturday’s cool, rainy weather, Kinnett said Sunday was one of the few good days for boating this year.

Yet Saturday’s waves of rain and cool, windy weather led to an underwhelming crowd at the Anchor Inn, as people waited inside the bar’s large outdoor tent for the rain to stop and a band to start playing.

“Last night, we had a decent night. It was just OK. It wasn’t like it should be,” Kinnett said.

It needs to be much better. Kinnett looks at the weeks in late June through mid-July as his bread-and-butter time of year—the span of summer when boating traffic literally fuels his coffers for the leaner times.

“This weekend should have really been the start of hammer time. The big boat traffic. That’s what keeps us afloat,” he said.

But that didn’t happen, and it hasn’t happened all year. In fact, he has even had people call him about rumors this summer that the river is “closed” to boating in Newville because of high waters.

“The river doesn’t close,” Kinnett said.

Still, rainy weather and high waters have weekend business at his bar down 30 percent this summer.

Kinnett said out-of-state vacationers have seen the lousy weekend forecasts the last two months. Many have decided not to come to the river or Lake Koshkonong at all.

That has hurt his pontoon boat rentals at the bar.

“We should have had all of them (the pontoons) rented out today, on a day like this,” he said.

Kinnett is luckier than some other businesses, particularly those further north on Lake Koshkonong. His bar has a private, pay-per-use slip, making the place a bit of a hot spot this year for boaters looking to skirt slow/no wake to get easy access to Lake Koshkonong.

Lake Koshkonong in its wide, offshore spots, has no slow/no wake restrictions.

One boater, Adam Lester of Rockford was launching his new boat at the Anchor Inn. He said the Rock River at Rockford has been under slow/no wake orders, and his family was itching to get some use out of the boat.

Yet Randy Hopp, an Edgerton resident whose home off Ellendale Road has riverfront access and a boat, said he hardly wants to bother with boating this year. Hopp said because of high waters and slow/no wake, he must putt along the river at baby speeds, and it takes him 45 minutes to get to Lake Koshkonong.

When the river gets to a certain height, it can become difficult or impossible for larger boats to go under the Highway 59 Bridge and onto Lake Koshkonong.

The bridge is passable right now, and Kinnett said he has seen reports that the river could recede 8 inches by the coming weekend. That would mean the bridge shouldn't be a problem for the big Fourth of July boating crush.

“We just need some nice weather,” he said.



Photos by Dan Lassiter/ dlassiter@gazettextra.com

A boat heads up the Rock River into Lake Koshkonong on a rainy Saturday afternoon. Rainy weekends and continuing high water levels on the river are hurting businesses that count on summer boat traffic.



Above: The Anchor Inn in Newville bustles with activity on Saturday as heavy rain probably plays a role in keeping some of the customers off the river.



Left: Anchor Inn workers Riley Babcock, left, and Brandon Kinnett try to stay dry while waiting for customers on a rainy Saturday afternoon.



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A fisherman seeks refuge from a downpour under the Highway 59 bridge in Newville. The high water levels have made it difficult for larger boats to fit under some bridges.



Joseph Lindquist, left, and Dave Eltman pilot a pontoon boat toward the docks at the Anchor Inn in Newville. The docked boats in the background are an indication of how quiet activity has been on the river this year because of frequent rainy weekends and continuing high water levels.