

Making waves over wake orders

County could amend Rock River slow/no wake rules

By Neil Johnson

njohnson@gazettextra.com

JANESVILLE

A Rock County Board committee is considering changes to ease a countywide slow/wake ordinance that has proved unpopular with Rock River boaters.

The board's Public Safety and Justice Committee on Monday will review and could relax a 2012 countywide mandate which now uses 6.5 feet as trigger for slow/no wake on southern parts of the Rock River, and 7.5 feet in the northern parts near Lake Koshkonong and Newville.

The proposed changes come as the board and Rock County Sheriff's officials have faced mounting pressure from boaters who are complaining that lingering high water levels on the Rock River and the county's slow/no wake rules are hampering the boating season.

Public Safety and Justice Committee member Hank Brill said the committee likely would have a recommendation by Monday on new water levels that would serve as a trigger for slow/no wake orders.

"We'll get it all figured out, and it'll probably go (to the county board) Thursday," Brill said.

That would bring a change in time for the Fourth of July weekend, which typically brings the summer's heaviest boating traffic on the Rock River.

According to a draft ordinance released Friday, the ordinance would relax criteria for when slow/no wake is imposed on the Rock River, including the following provisions:

The water level which would trigger slow/no wake orders at the river north of the Indianford Dam would be relaxed from 7.5 feet to 8 feet. That would allow the river to rise 6 inches above the current trigger for slow/no wake orders near Lake Koshkonong and Newville.

The Rock River would be broken into three zones, instead of the two used now. In the proposal, areas of the river south of the Beloit-Rock Townline Road bridge south to the county line would use 8.5 feet as a slow/no wake trigger. Now, that part of the river has a trigger of 6.5 feet.

The river from the Indianford dam south to Beloit-Rock Townline Road bridge would continue to have a slow/no wake trigger of 6.5 feet.

Rock County Sheriff's Captain Jude Maurer said Friday he has fielded dozens of phone calls in the last month from boaters frustrated that they can't have the run of the river.

As summer boating season enters full swing, irate calls from boaters have ramped up, Maurer said.

The sheriff's office is responsible for enforcing slow/wake orders, not setting and removing them during times of high water on the river.

The angriest boaters who have complained say they're looking at the river, particularly in the southern parts of the county, and that water levels seem low enough to lift slow/no wake orders.

Those boaters, Maurer said, have demanded that the sheriff's office simply quit enforcing slow/no wake orders.

"They're wondering why it is the orders are still in effect when perceived water levels are low enough for boaters to have unabated access," Maurer said. "Their grievance is that you (county officials) need to take care of this, and not enforce the ordinance."

While it's unlikely police would suspend enforcement to appease boaters, Maurer said he has been referring the fuming boaters to county board members, who wrote and enacted the ordinance.

Part of the reason for boaters' frustration: The river has lingered above slow/no wake levels since March, when heavy snow runoff swelled the river to near-flood conditions. This spring, days of heavy rainfall pushed the river into a critical flood stage.

Floodwaters this spring from Lake Koshkonong south to the state line reached levels second only to the Rock River flood of 2011, and waters have been slow to recede.

"I think Fourth of July has become a trigger point. They (boaters) have a tradition of being able to go out and enjoy the water on boats," Maurer said.

Maurer said he's not sure if businesses that serve boaters or ***quasi-governmental bodies such as the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District*** have voiced concerns to county officials about the slowly receding river remaining locked in a slow/no wake pattern.

The county board in 2012 set blanket mandates for slow/no wake triggers for north and south portions of the river based on United States Geologic Survey river gauge readings. The ordinance was put in place for safety and to ensure protection of seawalls that Rock residents on the shores of the Rock River have built to control wave erosion.

Prior to the ordinance, towns in the county were responsible for setting and releasing slow/no wake orders. That resulted in a patchwork for slow/no wake orders that proved problematic for boaters and riverfront residents.

At times, one town might have had a slow/no wake order in effect while others might not have one set. Maurer said that created confusion for boaters and residents and it was one of the main reasons why the county set a blanket mandate for slow/no wake orders on the river.

IF YOU GO

What: A meeting of the Rock County Board's Public Safety and Justice Committee to consider a recommendation to amend the countywide slow/no wake ordinance for the Rock River. Officials are considering relaxing current criteria for when the county sets and releases slow/no wake orders on parts of the river.

When: 3 p.m. Monday.

Where: Rock County Courthouse, 51 S. Main St., Janesville, fifth floor, room N-1.