

Parisi's 'no wake' veto revs up debate over boats on lakes

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Another summer boating season has begun, reviving controversy on Dane County lakes over speed limits for motorboats.

JoAnn Tiedemann would like county officials to spend a Saturday afternoon at her home on Waunona Way in Madison watching boats rocket to and from Lake Monona's outlet into the Yahara River.



“Observe how fast and recklessly boaters roar through this bottleneck,” Tiedemann said. “Squaw Bay on Lake Monona is no longer safe, period.”

Tiedemann wants lake water levels lowered and boats slowed down to minimize shore erosion, but some boaters caution against too many slow-down orders.

“It really greatly reduces the number of boats on the lakes,” said Gene Dellinger, who owns D&S bait shop on Northport Drive. “At the marinas, the boats just sit there.”

A county ordinance restricts boat speeds within 200 feet of shore and allows the county executive, the sheriff and the county board chair to jointly order extended “no wake” zones to all surfaces of all county lakes.

County officials say each summer they are flooded with calls from people who question why an order was issued or rescinded at a given time, so a pair of county committees worked since last August on changes that would tie the orders more clearly to certain water levels. The full board approved a last-minute compromise May 19 that would have required a staff recommendation to be made publicly when the lakes rose to certain levels. It also would have allowed just the sheriff and just one other official — either the executive or the board chair — to issue orders.

County Executive Joe Parisi vetoed the compromise on May 26, saying it wasn't properly aired, it could leave him out of the decision to issue orders, and would inadvertently lead to more no-wake days.

County Board Chairman Scott McDonell said Parisi, in his first term, wants and deserves a chance to manage the controversy under current law.

Lake Monona is the focus of the discussion because urban runoff lifts the lake quickly, while water is slow to drain down the relatively flat, weedy Yahara River to the south.

County Board member John Hendrick, who represents a section of the isthmus with Lake Monona shoreline, has long pushed to slow down boat traffic, saying that speedboat wakes worsen erosion of private property and public parks.

“Something needs to be done,” Hendrick said Wednesday. “I think it's a serious issue. Lake Monona is above the summer maximum, and the DNR has said for decades that water levels above the maximum create excessive soil erosion. Today would be a good day to declare a slow/no-wake on Lake Monona.”

On Wednesday the lake level was at 845.28 feet above sea level, higher than the target maximum of 845.20 set by the state. Under the vetoed ordinance, a recommendation for a no-wake order would be made at 847.40.

From their Nishishin Trail home in Monona, Larry and Nancy Miller watch boats zooming through Squaw Bay, but they no longer worry about erosion. Over the last three years they've spent \$14,000 on berms and boulders to keep the lake from washing into their yard and their home during high water.

"I personally don't mind it," Nancy Miller said of the speedboat traffic. "I think the lakes belong to everyone."

But she said she understands how the noise and wakes would upset kayakers and owners of property closer to the river's mouth.

On the other end of the lake in Madison, Gregory Humphreys said erosion has toppled five or six trees into the lake at B.B. Clarke Beach since he moved into a house across Spaight Street in 2007.

Humphreys has urged the city to install more rock barriers to protect the shore.

Installation of "rip rap" is scheduled this fall, and similar work is being done now at James Madison Park, said Lisa Coleman, a city engineer. However, projects are often delayed because of budget problems, objections from neighbors who don't like the rocks, and the time it takes to obtain permits, she said.

Jerry Wesner, a town of Burke resident who drives boats for the Mad-City Ski Team, says he's been frustrated when no-wake orders have shut down club shows and practices, but he sympathizes with anyone who has seen their shoreline wash away.

"I'm sure there's bad taste in some people's mouths when the ski team is out there running the wake," Wesner said, although he points out that much of the shore where the team operates around Law Park is reinforced with rock. "I just don't know what the happy level is. I just know the water level changes drastically based on the rain that we get."