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Rock County considers change to slow/no wake levels on Rock River

By NEIL JOHNSON (Contact) Monday, Sept. 19, 2011

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JANESVILLE — A Rock County Board committee is considering changes to slow/no-wake standards on the Rock River.

Just how big a change is unclear.

At a meeting today, the Rock County Public Safety and Justice Committee will take up a resolution for an ordinance that would set objective standards for the water levels at which the county would set and enforce slow/no-wake orders on the Rock River.

The ordinance would split the Rock River in Rock County into north and south halves, using the Indianford dam as the dividing line.

But a draft ordinance leaves blank exactly what water level the county would use to establish slow/no-wake standards for either part of the river.

“We’re trying to draft one (slow/no-wake ordinance) that will work for all sides,” Ivan Collins, public safety and justice committee chairman, said in an interview over the weekend.

IF YOU GO

What: The Rock County Public Safety and Justice Committee will review and hear public comments on a resolution that would set a countywide standard for water levels for slow/no-wake on the Rock River and Lake Koshkonong.

When: 4 p.m. today

Where: Rock County Courthouse, 51 S. Main St., Janesville.

Slow/no-wake orders on the river are now based on standards set in town and municipal ordinances and are enforced by the Rock County Sheriff's Office.

But the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District last year filed a petition with the county requesting a countywide slow/no-wake ordinance with an "objective numerical standard" for water levels.

The lake district wants the county to use flood action stage as that standard, said its chairman, Brian Christianson.

Flood action stage is a foot below true flood stage.

Christianson has said having the standard at action stage would shorten the time slow/no-wake orders stay in effect during spring and early summer, when it typically takes the river longer to recede than rise. He has said that would be a boon to recreational boaters.

Christianson also has said it would give the lake district a buffer for water levels and would allow the lake district to use the Indianford dam to raise water levels on Lake Koshkonong without affecting boat traffic on the river.

The lake district's plan to raise water levels using the dam is tied up in a suit against the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, which is headed to the state Supreme Court.

Collins said "all sides" include:

-- The Rock-Koshkonong Lake District, which has petitioned the county, asking it to set a uniform slow/no-wake standard at flood action stage along parts of the Rock River in Rock County.

-- Rock County residents who have property along the Rock River, some of whom have said they'd oppose boats cruising the river at flood action stage over concerns about possible property damage and shoreline erosion, officials said.

-- Officials from townships in the Rock River basin, which already have slow/no-wake standards set by their own ordinances.

Collins said the committee hopes to draw input today from all three groups. He said the committee could make a recommendation as early as today on suggested water levels in the slow/no-wake ordinance, but it would need final approval by the county board.

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At Lake Koshkonong, flood action stage is 9 feet. That's 1½ feet higher than the town of Fulton's slow/no-wake recommendation of 7½ feet.

Town of Fulton Chairman Evan Sayre said he plans to attend Monday's committee meeting.

Sayre said he's heard from a half-dozen residents who live along the river in Fulton Township who say they don't want boats cutting wakes while the river's at flood action stage. Sayre said those residents built piers and seawalls at levels based on a 7½-foot slow/no-wake standard. He said the residents are concerned that if boats are allowed to cruise at higher water levels, it could damage their property and cause shoreline erosion.

"There's no reason why you'd want to be tearing around in March and April with a \$50,000 boat when people's piers are still under water," Sayre said. "It (slow/no-wake) needs to be put on and taken off in an orderly manner."

Sayre said the Fulton Town Board decided earlier this year it wants to keep its slow/no-wake standard at 7½ feet or "some realistic, manageable number."

"If somebody's going to be happy with it at 7.62 (feet) or something like that, I'm not going to file a lawsuit over it or anything," he said.

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