

Officer: Teach every student water safety

By Tim Richard
staff writer

IT'S NOT the money Bob Smith is interested in. It's the water safety the money could buy.

"No one would think of giving teenage kids the key to the car and letting them drive without instruction," said Sgt. Smith, a Troy resident and head of the Oakland County Sheriff's Department marine safety division.

His motto: "Have materials, will travel." Smith would like to teach marine safety to every high school student in Oakland County, just the way driving a car on a road is taught.

"We live in a state full of lakes and water," he said, noting that Oakland has 450 lakes and Michigan, the Great Lake State, officially has 11,037.

THE FACT that a school district in the southern part of the county has no lakes, and the principal doesn't see the need for water safety instruction, is irrelevant, Smith said. He points out that a teenager who drowned in a Gilbert Lake boating mishap last month was from landlocked Oak Park.

Last weekend pointed out the need for greater safety. A Rochester Hills girl, 14, died after her leg was severed by a powerboat's propeller as she swam in Oakland's Lotus Lake.

A fisherman on Wayne County's Belleville Lake died when his 10-foot boat was hit by a powerboat.

A Bloomfield Township woman and the Davidson man she was trying to save both drowned at Seven Lakes State Park in northern Oakland.

ABOUT THAT money Bob Smith is interested in.

It's part of a package of four marine safety bills on which state Sen. Richard Fessler, R-Commerce, plans to hold hearings soon in his committee on State Affairs, Tourism and Transportation.

Smith's eye is on SB 4, which would slap a \$10 judgment fee on top

of any fine that a judge levies against a boater for violating the Marine Safety Act. Fines collected in Oakland County would be earmarked for the county's marine safety program.

The money could be used for law enforcement and education. Smith emphasizes the educational use.

"I get \$123,000 from Lansing now. We run a program that costs \$500,000 a year," Smith said in an interview in Fessler's State Capitol office. "The county makes up the difference."

Last year Oakland, with about 11 percent of Michigan's population, issued 20 percent of all the watercraft violations in the state, Smith said.

WHENEVER SGT. Smith can get a group of 20 to 30, he'll put on the six-hour marine safety course. Groups can call him at 858-4991 in Pontiac.

With more money, he could assign one instructor to each of the 28 school districts within the county.

Another legislative measure would require that all driver education courses also include at least six hours of instruction in the safe operation of recreational vehicles and watercraft.

It would parallel the driver training programs received by 130,000 high school sophomores every year.

FESSLER is pushing a measure to license motorboat mechanics, much the same as motor vehicle mechanics are licensed.

Consumer rights are spelled out in the bill. If passed, the act would be administered by the secretary of state.

"There are a lot of ripoffs," Fessler said.

The second-term senator from Oakland's lakes country was particularly moved by the death of a girl caused by a boat explosion last year. It seems the mechanic installed an automotive starter instead of a marine starter.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Oakland Sheriff's deputies search Gilbert Lake last month for the body of a young man who drowned in a boating accident.

Each year the county records a dozen drowning deaths. The number is steady, but Sgt. Bob Smith wants to lower it.

Boat safety bills in Senate panel

Here are the four bills in the boat safety package now being considered by the Michigan Senate Committee on State Affairs, Tourism and Transportation:

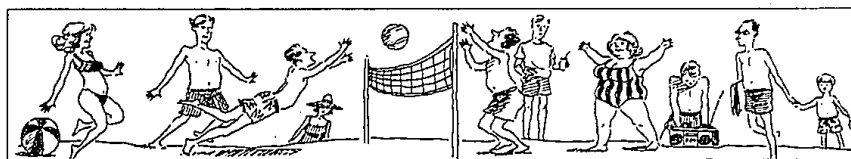
• SB 4 — Requires a \$10 "judgment fee" on top of other fines for violations of the Marine Safety Act. Fees would be earmarked for the marine safety program in the county where it is collected.

• SB 5 — Would require the certification of motorboat mechanics under the Motorboat Service and Repair Act. Mechanics would be tested and certified. Consumers' rights would be spelled out — such as a written estimate and itemized statement.

• SB 371 — Sets up a Marine Safety Council under the Department of Natural Resources to review boating accidents and develop a comprehensive boating safety program. An 11-member council would include men and women from law enforcement, Red Cross, industry and consumers council. The bill also would require divers

to place a buoy or boat with a red flag 200 feet from their operation. Current law specifies only 100 feet.

• SB 372 — Requires six hours of instruction in safe operation of watercraft and recreational vehicles for high school sophomores. It would be similar to the 20-30 hours of driver training now being taught.



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