

Boat safety bills clear the Senate

Three marine safety bills sponsored by Sen. Richard Fessler have cleared the Michigan Senate and are on their way to the House of Representatives.

"Tragically, there have been 11 boating fatalities already this season," Fessler said. "We can't go on letting people think that operating a motorboat — or even repairing one — requires no skills or responsibility whatsoever."

The bills are:

- SB 5 — require licensing of motorboat mechanics. The Secretary of State would test and license mechanics, charging fees ranging from \$50

to \$300 a year. The bill parallels a law covering auto mechanics.

- SB 371 — creating a 15-member Marine Safety Education Commission to review boating accidents and develop education programs. Boat owners would be charged \$3 more on their three-year registrations. The revenue would be retained in the county of registry.

- SB 372 — mandating six hours of watercraft and recreational vehicle safety to be included in drivers' training courses.

Fessler's State Affairs Committee dropped a bill adding a \$10 surcharge on tickets paid by people violating watercraft laws.

Libel protection bill OK'd

AP — Michigan reporters would gain new protections against lawsuits when reporting about public documents and proceedings, under a bill approved by the state House.

The House voted 82-11 to change the standard for determining whether a private citizen was libeled because of a report on an issue of public interest.

House Bill 4932, sponsored by Rep. William Bryant Jr., R-Grosse Pointe Farms, now goes to the state Senate.

It was supported by all Observer & Eccentric lawmakers except two who didn't vote — Mat Duanskins, D-Lake Orion, and William Keith, D-Garden City.

It calls for the libel standard to be malice, knowledge that a statement was false, or reckless disregard for whether it was false.

THE BILL was sought by the state's media outlets after a 1986 state Supreme Court ruling lowered

the standard to negligence in a ruling against The Battle Creek Enquirer.

Media representatives argued that the court's new standard left journalists unsure whether they are protected from lawsuits when reporting on the official actions and reports of government agencies.

They argued that it was ridiculous for a reporter to be sued for libel for reporting the contents of an inaccurate government report.

BUT REP. William Van Regenmorter cautioned the bill would give reporters the freedom to quote reports without checking their accuracy.

Van Regenmorter, R-Jenison, said he was particularly concerned about the media's reporting of the contents of juvenile records, recently made public by the Legislature.

He said a juvenile record, for example, could list a child's descrip-

tion of one parent's extramarital affairs, even if the information were incorrect.

"As long as a report says something, the media can report it, and you can't do anything about it," Van Regenmorter said.

Bryant argued that would place an unrealistic burden on the media. He said government must be responsible for the contents of its own records.

"Rep. Van Regenmorter seeks to take all that part of this bill out so that even though you and I and John and Jane Doe can walk in off the street and see a particular record because it is generally available to the public . . . the media couldn't report that same thing without having

to prove the truth of what is in the report," Bryant said.

"We need to opt on the side of greatest freedom of the press," he said, "rather than think of every horror story that might happen."

The bill was introduced after a Calhoun County jury ruled that David Rouch was libeled when the Enquirer reported that he'd been arrested and charged with rape. Rouch never was formally charged, and a second suspect was arrested later in that case.

The jury found that the Enquirer published false information and failed to exercise reasonable care. Lawyers for the newspaper have said they intend to appeal. Bryant's bill wouldn't affect that judgment.

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