

Back on the boating beat

By Amy Carr, Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD — After an eight-year hiatus in local marine patrols of Onota and Pontoosuc lakes, police have reactivated the beat this summer with the aid of \$10,000 from the state's community policing funds.

Twelve of Pittsfield's officers are available for the patrols, which police say is a renewed commitment to ensuring safety on the lakes.

"There's no lanes out here," said Sgt. Mark Bushey while steering the department's spruced-up boat around Onota Lake this week. "It's a free-for-all, and serious boaters want us out here."

Serious boaters on Onota and Pontoosuc lakes will have their wish during peak hours, nights and weekends now through the end of boating season, according to Bushey and Police Captain John O'Neil. O'Neil said the patrol was forced off the water nearly a decade ago due to a lack of funds and volunteer patrol cops, as well as more pressing enforcement priorities. In the meantime, the police boat sat idle, and it was in need of a heavy tune-up.

But O'Neil said several recent complaints from Pontoosuc and Onota lakes about personal watercraft underscored a growing need to fund the patrol.

"We couldn't be out there in canoes, you know," O'Neil said with a chuckle. "There are more and more boats on the lakes, and all you keep hearing from people is this is an accident waiting to happen. It's a necessity — not an option anymore."

Local boat dealers donated parts and labor to restore the police boat to working order. Bushey, who served on the original marine squad 16 years ago, said the freshly fixed patrol boat will provide a presence and enforcement when needed. The patrol will target speeding and alcohol consumption, in addition to ensuring people use proper safety equipment.

All watercraft must obey the 45 mph speed limit, carry a fire extinguisher and proper life preservers, use navigational lights at night, and, above all, be aware of other people. Bushey noted that alcohol and boating often go together, but the drunken driving penalties in a watercraft are identical to those in a road vehicle.

The Pittsfield marine patrol will work closely with the Environmental Police, which have ultimate jurisdiction over all state bodies of water. Thus far, a dozen officers have volunteered for the local squad, encouraging O'Neil to speculate that one of the only marine patrols in Western Massachusetts could become a permanent summertime fixture.

Since the relaunch of the repaired police boat on Wednesday, Bushey and lake-side partner Sgt. John Murphy have already noticed a shift in boaters' behavior. They say when the police boat is on the lake, word spreads like wildfire to shape up and slow down.

Painted neatly across the side of the police boat is a simple phrase that both sergeants say epitomizes the marine patrol: Uniting with the community.

"One time, we were out here and there were eight people in a little row boat about an inch from taking on water," said Murphy. "There was a 2-week-old baby on board, and who knows what could have happened if another boat would have come by and created a wake."

"It was a good thing we happened to be there," agreed Bushey. "We're not here to whack people with every violation we can. We're here to say, 'Knock it off or you're going to get whacked.' "

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