



Increased water patrols make waves

As more agencies join Coast Guard and sheriff's deputies in policing local waters, they face a rising tide of criticism from bothered boaters

By **Dan Herbeck**

News Staff Reporter

- Published: August 26, 2011, 10:37 PM

Updated: August 27, 2011, 9:53 AM

When Mike Moyer takes his motorboat out on Lake Ontario or the Niagara River, he sometimes feels like he's in the middle of a floating police convention.

Moyer remembers when just Coast Guard and sheriff's deputies patrolled the Niagara and lakes Ontario and Erie. But nowadays he sometimes sees four or five police boats -- all from different agencies -- within a couple of hours.

"You see all these boats, one after another -- Coast Guard, the Sheriff, Customs, Border Patrol, State Police, State Parks Police. It's a wonder they aren't crashing into each other," said Moyer, 66, whose family has run a small marina in the Wilson Harbor of Niagara County since the 1960s.

"I know they say it's needed for homeland security, and I have nothing against that. But to me, it's more like homeland harassment."

Many of the region's other sheriff's offices, local police departments and local fire departments also have boats on the water for safety and law enforcement, and police presence appears to be at an all-time high.

But if that's true, it's because of an increase in federal patrol of the shore. Sgt. Rick Lauricella of the Erie County Sheriff's Office said his department operates only one boat on a daily basis, and that his is the only New York State agency that does so.

However, Lauricella said he has heard of the problem before. To help combat it, the Sheriff's Office started giving out stickers last year to boaters whose vessels passed safety inspections.

"You can place it on the windshield to let the other agencies know that in that calendar year we inspected your vessel and it was up to par and met with state requirements," Lauricella said. "But it won't necessarily keep any other agency from making a stop or anything."

Moyer is not the only boater or fisherman critical of so many police boats and patrols.

They note that the escalation occurs at a time when fewer pleasure boats are on the water because of high gasoline prices, rising unemployment and the faltering economy.

"We've had customers tell us that they've been stopped and boarded by three or four different police agencies in one afternoon," said Patricia Van Camp, who owns the Big Catch Bait & Tackle Shop on Niagara Street in Buffalo with her husband, William. "To me, it's overkill. It's ludicrous. I don't see how our government has the money anymore to run all these boats."

When asked last week how much of the nation's \$43 billion homeland security budget is spent on police boats, spokespersons from the U.S. Homeland Security Department declined to specify.

But a fully equipped police boat can easily cost \$250,000 or much more, and the gas-gulping vessels can sometimes use \$200 in gasoline in a single hour, especially if operated at high speeds in swift currents, according to law enforcement officials.

One Buffalo boater recalled seeing a local police boat crew spending more than \$750 to fill the boat's gas tanks.

Yet the Coast Guardsmen in downtown Buffalo who patrol the local waters say they are thankful to have help from other law enforcement agencies.

"A lot of boats from different agencies are on the water, and we're cognizant of that," said Dennis A. O'Connell, officer in charge of the Buffalo station. "But we have a great working relationship with these other agencies. Some of them are out for homeland security, some for boater safety and some for law enforcement. They never get in our way."

O'Connell, Executive Petty Officer Thomas J. D'Amore and Boatswain Mate Blake Carabello spoke of the need for strong enforcement of water safety regulations when a Buffalo News reporter and photographer accompanied them on a recent patrol of Buffalo's inner harbor and the Niagara River.

There may be fewer pleasure boats on the water these days, but some serious incidents occurred on local waterways this summer.

-- July 30, a boat capsized near Strawberry Island in the Niagara River and eight people -- including a pregnant woman -- were rescued.

-- July 17, a Coast Guard crew pulled two men in their 70s from the Niagara River off Youngstown after their sailboat capsized.

-- July 14, a 56-year-old fisherman who is a heart patient was rescued three miles from shore in Lake Erie near Dunkirk after falling out of his boat without a life jacket. In that case, the Chautauqua County Sheriff's Marine Patrol came to the man's rescue after he had been in the water for two hours.

"People from these other agencies have helped out many times," O'Connell said.

At Wilson Harbor, fisherman Albert Bodolus, 50, of Athens, Pa., spoke about a scary day two summers ago when he was 17 miles from shore in Lake Ontario and his boat's engine died.

"I called for help, and the Olcott Fire Department sent their boat right out to tow me in," Bodolus said. "I was very thankful. As far as I'm concerned, the more police boats on the water, the better. If you're out on the water on a regular basis, you're going to need their help someday."

But some boaters, such as Moyer and Van Camp, question the need for so many police boats, especially during a time when the federal government is trillions of dollars in debt and there are cries for cutbacks in funding for health, education, poverty programs and Social Security.

"We're told that every government agency is pretty much broke, but we still can find the money for all these boats," Moyer said. "I don't get that."

The Niagara County Sheriff's Office currently operates three boats, and officials there said much of the funding for the operation comes from state government and from federal homeland security programs.

Thomas C. Beatty, the chief deputy in the office, disagrees with Moyer's contention that there are too many police boats on Niagara County waterways.

"We live on an unprotected border with Canada. Our boat crews look for safety and border security issues," Beatty said. "I don't think there are too many police boats out there."

Beatty said his and many other police departments are concerned that federal money for waterway security will dry up in the next year or two. Congress and the Obama administration have discussed eliminating some of the funding for such operations because of the national deficit.

News Staff Reporter Kevin Bargnes contributed to this report.