

Tuesday, April 19, 2005 [E-mail This Article](#)

Winnepesaukee speed limit gains ground

By GEOFF CUNNINGHAM Jr.

Staff Writer

LACONIA — A House bill proposing a 45 mph daytime and 25 mph nighttime speed limit on Lake Winnepesaukee is picking up momentum.

Members of a new and growing group known as the Winnepesaukee Family Alliance for Boating Safety are meeting with area business, associations and legislative leaders to push for the passage of HB 162.

While thousands have already pledged their support for the measure, those who would be charged with enforcing it remain skeptical.

Representative James Pilliod of Belmont introduced the bill during this legislative session as one of many he said could help promote safer boating on the state's largest lake.

"Some of the boats out there now are going upwards of 90 mph ... it's unnecessary," said Pilliod.

Pilliod isn't the only one supporting the slowing down of boats on the big lake as members of WFABS have been working on a strategy to get the word out about the issue of speed on the lake.

Harold "Hal" Lyon, a member of the group, said organizers are currently preparing for a mass mailing that will provide residents with information about a speeding situation that he described as the most significant change that he has seen on the lake during his 60-plus years of living on it.

Lyon, an author and avid fisherman who has property on Bear Island, said the "proliferation" of offshore speed-boats threatens everyone from fishermen to those collecting tourist dollars.

Specifically, he said people are simply scared to be on the lake because of the number of boaters traveling at high speeds.

"There is an attitude problem that we have here."

Lyon wrote about the experiences he has encountered with speeding boaters in his most recent book.

He recalled one instance in which he saw a pair of older salmon fisherman nearly capsized off of Rattlesnake Island when the small boat they were in was passed on both sides by racing speed-boats.

They never even looked back ... they didn't even know they had done it," explained Lyon. He said the incident took place in May during the annual derby and could have been dangerous.

Lyon said local folks aren't the only ones complaining about the problem. He said he was approached by more than one person during a recent trip to a fishing exposition in Massachusetts.

"People are coming up to me saying they don't fish Winnepesaukee anymore," said Lyon.

Lyon said WFABS is made up of a wide variety of people and has even been given the support of three area marina owners, who they claim are among the business people who understand that speeding is hurting tourism.

HB 162 has been retained for consideration by the House Resources, Recreation and Development Committee and will be reviewed this summer. Officials said

they expect the committee to hold public hearings on the proposed speed limits in various Lakes Region towns in July and August.

While the bill still has a long way to go before it is even voted on, Pilliod said he has experienced a remarkable amount of support from boating groups, island residents and regular residents.

According to Jared Teutsch of the New Hampshire Lakes Association the bill has upwards of 3,200 signatures of support. "It's actually been very well received in the Lakes Region," said Teutsch, the NHLA's director of environmental policy. Both Pilliod and Teutsch said the bill is being supported by residents who list excessive speed as among the reasons they no longer feel safe venturing out on the lake, especially during the busy weekends.

"That is really where the problem is ... the fear of residents that they can't enjoy the lake. They feel helpless," said Teutsch.

Pilliod said HB 162 will not cure all the safety concerns, but could represent a "core" standard that could improve conditions and help propel further measures. The bill is similar to one passed for Squam Lake that sets a 40 mph and 20 mph day/night speed-limit for those on that body of water. While the Lakes Association has yet to formally endorse the bill, officials from the group agree that it is among the only ways of slowing down boaters.

Teutsch explained that the state does have a mechanism by which individual communities can petition the Marine Patrol for speed limits on lakes.

He explained that while such petitions work well on smaller lakes that lie within one town, they become less feasible for larger ones whose waters lie in several towns and would allow for varying rules.

Teutsch said he would like to see the speed-limit bill amended to include the state's six largest lakes, which all have a Marine Patrol presence.

The director said — contrary to what some say — such speed limit laws have been successfully implemented and enforced in other states such as New York's Lake George and Saratoga.

However, officials in the Granite State remain skeptical of such laws.

Marine Patrol Director David T. Barrett spoke out against the bill during a hearing in January saying that it would be difficult to enforce. As his crews get ready for another busy summer, he said he has seen and heard little to change his position.

"I'm just not sure that it's enforceable. My concern is that it (the bill) will create an expectation we cannot fulfill," he said.

The director explained that during the summer months he can have upwards of 15 boats on Lake Winnepesaukee. Even with all his officers on the water, he said it would be extremely difficult for them to target and catch speeders on 92 square miles of water.

Barrett said the open nature of the lake would make it difficult for his crews to locate speeders reported by island residents or other boaters.

He said even if one of his boats witnessed an infraction, a radar device might not work properly on the water as such technology needs to be mounted on a stable platform.

"You're just not going to catch people," said Barrett.

Teutsch said those supporting the bill don't expect Marine Patrol to catch everyone who violated the limits. "They don't want to split hairs. They want (to stop) people who are going 80 and 90 miles per hour," he said.

Barrett said — while he supports measures to make the lake safer — many must realize that no law will change a situation that has evolved as the population has increased and technology has provided faster craft.

"This is not the lake it was 40 years ago ... that's just the reality," said Barrett.

The director said the sad reality is that it only takes a few boaters to create a problem. He confirmed that he has been hearing about a large contingency who are pushing the passage of the bill. He has said he is open to changing his mind if it can be proven to be enforceable.

On Monday he assured that his agency will do everything in its power to uphold the law if it is approved. "If they pass it then we'll do it ... I'm just not going to guarantee how successful it will be," said Barrett.

Those seeking more information on the WFABS can go to their website at www.winnfabs.com.

Geoffrey Cunningham Jr. can be reached by calling 524-3800 ext. 5931 or by email at gcunningham@citizen.com. © 2005 Geo. J. Foster Company