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Funding of water rescue may end

By Kevin Eigelbach
Post staff reporter

For 36 years, members of the Boone County Water Rescue have patrolled the Ohio River, rescued stranded boaters and helped to recover the bodies of drowning victims.

For many of those years, Boone County taxpayers have provided the bulk of support for the 30-person squad, paying about \$200,000 a year to maintain its fleet of a half-dozen boats.

But that may end June 30.

As it prepares its fiscal 2003-2004 budget, the Boone County Fiscal Court is considering ending funding for the squad, possibly to pay another organization to perform similar services.

"Being responsible to the taxpayers is something I take very seriously," Judge-Executive Gary Moore said. "If we can meet the need by being part of a regional entity, that's something we need to explore."

Boone County Administrator Jim Parsons plans to meet with rescue squad founder and captain Dale Appel today to discuss the situation and get his suggestions for possible budget cuts.

Funding for the squad survived the first reading of the new, \$110-million budget, but that could change, Parsons said. He will make a final budget recommendation at the Fiscal Court's meeting on June 24.

Appel did not return messages Tuesday seeking comment.

The Fiscal Court has cut funds for the squad a little every year since Moore took office in 1999. About two years ago, he said, the court eliminated funding for the squad's rapid response team, which was charged with rescuing people in distress on the water.

Their efforts didn't work, Moore said, because the members were just on call, not on the river all the time.

"In every case we could find, being able to rescue someone on the water, if you weren't already on the water itself, didn't work," he said.

The court has reached the point where if it cuts any more of the squad's budget, Moore said, the fleet would start to deteriorate for lack of maintenance.

If the court wants to eliminate the squad, it might be time to do that while the boats still can be sold, he said.

County officials have talked with members of Task Force One in Hamilton County about assuming some of the jobs that Boone County Water Rescue now does, Moore said.

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Task Force One is a full-time, paid dive team, based in the Loveland Fire Department, that patrols the Little Miami and Great Miami rivers and recovers bodies from the Ohio River.

Boone County also is looking at other options, such as cutting the squad's funding and finding regional partners that would help fund it, Moore said.

It would cost Boone County at least \$15,000 to have another organization do the essential things the Boone County squad now does, he said.

Only Kenton County and Covington help Boone County fund the Water Rescue Squad, and they each pay only \$15,000 annually.

It's money well spent, Covington Mayor Butch Callery said. Covington has only one boat of its own.

"They were invaluable when we were looking for Michael Partin's body that one time," Callery said, referring to the Covington police officer who fell into the Ohio and drowned in 1998 as he was chasing a fleeing criminal suspect across the Clay Wade Bailey Bridge. "They provide a great service for us."

Appel started the squad after his best friend and his friend's father-in-law drowned in the Ohio River. He didn't want others to suffer through what he had -- days of waiting for the bodies to resurface before they could be recovered.

Over the years, the squad has pulled many bodies out of the water, as well as ferried flood victims to safety and used underwater cameras to help raise a sunken towboat. In May, its divers found a gun thrown into a pond after a robbery attempt.

On weekends, the squad patrols 60 miles of shoreline, from below Big Bone Creek on the Ohio River to Locust Pike on the Licking River.

Squad members look for boaters in trouble, frequently towing stranded boats to the nearest marina.

They have no law enforcement powers, but they have emergency medical training. Their largest boat is essentially a floating ambulance, complete with a defibrillator.

No other governmental body in the region provides such a service for boaters, not even Hamilton County, Parsons said.

The city of Cincinnati has two fire and rescue boats, manned by paid employees.

Campbell County Water Rescue has a volunteer squad with three fire and rescue boats and a swift water raft.

Campbell County Fiscal Court pays about \$21,500 a year to support the Campbell County squad, Chief Joe Davis said.

He said he hoped that Boone County Fiscal Court wouldn't do away with that county's squad. It would leave a large void in Boone County, he said.

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