

Playing Nice in the Sandbox and the River

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The recreational sport of wakeboarding is popular along the Black River, but the constant large wakes caused by the boats has effected people's use of the river and caused damage to piers and docks and erosion of the shore. Sen. Kathleen Vinehout attempts to find a solution that allows everyone to enjoy the river.

LA CROSSE, WI - "People are being driven off the river," Sue told Black River area residents. "My kids can't dive off the dock with the big boats. ... It didn't used to be this way. We could all get along - kayakers, canoers, and boaters. I wouldn't dream of letting my kids kayak now."

Friends of the Black River gathered to talk with boat owners about river use. Some felt big boats had taken over the river.

Playing nice in the sandbox means respecting others play. The six-year-old bully who throws sand and drives other children away does not 'play nice.'

The public meeting I attended with Sue and about seventy others had at its heart the request to 'play nice' on the river.

A few years ago, some river users brought 'wake boats' to the river. They used the Black River Flowage for the sport of 'wake boarding'.

Sometimes called 'wake surfing' or 'wake skating', wake board riders follow a boat designed to create a large and sustained wake. Residents said these waves could be two or three feet high. We learned from DNR officials that wake-action from these boats was four times greater than a typical ski-boat.

Wake boarders at the meeting described the Black River as ideal for their sport: the river is straight ("the straighter the better") and smooth.

Other residents complained the wakes created by these boats damaged floating piers and docks, exacerbated erosion along the river increasing the number of down trees and damage to the bank. One person shared a story about the wake knocking over an elderly man standing on a dock, sending his walker into the river.

Residents showed photographs of the damage caused by constant large wakes. "This photo shows an area on my property where the bank was undercut by four feet or so...I lost six feet of property over the last 20 years." Jeff described how he built a sea wall to protect the shoreline. He continues to have problems with large waves that result in broken lights, dents and dings to his pontoon boat tied up at his dock.

Other families told stories about how they curtailed or lost their use of the river because of the wake boats. Wally Capper said his family used to come to the river to canoe and kayak. "Every one [of the wake boarders] likes to do a U-turn in front of our property." His family no longer comes to canoe and kayak.

Wake boarders defended their use of the river. One woman reasoned all city residents made an investment in the river – the flowage area created by the Black River Falls dam. "We enjoy the river," she said. "I don't want to take away the option of people to use the river." A man added, "This seems like a witch hunt to me... There are a whole lot of factors that led to riverbank erosion and dock damage."

The local warden explained current boating ordinances: boaters must use 'slow-no wake' speed within 100 feet of the shoreline. Boaters must also stay 100 feet clear of swimmers. The widest spot in the river is 405 feet and the narrowest is 315 feet. This leaves "very little or no channel for boats to go by without slowing to 'no-wake' speed." The warden asked people to "be my

eyes and ears”.

People argued and sometimes talked over each other. Emotions were high. Nevertheless, people were civil – on both sides – often referring to each other as “Sir” or “Ma’am”. One man described it as thus: “Upper Black River has a lot of families, a lot of locals. No one wants to turn in their neighbor.”

As I left the meeting, one wake boat supporter asked if I had “an easy solution.”

“No,” I shook my head. The easy solution is to ‘play nice’ and let everyone enjoy the river safely.

Lawmakers get involved to help make sure people ‘play nice.’ Laws protect weaker users and restrict potential bullies. However, there are consequences – sometimes unanticipated – to new laws.

The best solution is the one created at the lowest level possible – between neighbors.

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