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Budget woes may scuttle water rescue

By Kevin Eigelbach
Post staff reporter

For 36 years, members of the Boone County Water Rescue have patrolled the Ohio River, looking for boaters in trouble, providing emergency medical assistance or towing stranded boats to the nearest marina.

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 have emergency medical training and their largest boat is essentially a floating ambulance, complete with a defibrillator. In worst-case scenarios they help to recover the bodies of drowning victims.

No other governmental body in the region provides such an array of services for boaters, not even Hamilton County. But paying for the 30-person squad and the fleet of a half-dozen boats has come at a cost to Boone County taxpayers of about \$200,000 a year.

And now, as Boone County prepares its 2003-2004 budget, it is considering ending funding for the squad and either paying some other organization to provide similar services or perhaps trying to become part a regional entity.

A decision by the Boone County Fiscal Court on the funding is expected by June 30.

"If we can meet the need by being part of a regional entity, that's something we need to explore," Judge-Executive Gary Moore said.

The Fiscal Court has cut funds for the squad a little every year since Moore took office in 1999. About two years ago, the court eliminated funding for the squad's rapid response team, whose job is to rescue people in distress on the water.

"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," Moore said.

Also, any more cuts could mean the fleet starts to deteriorate for lack of maintenance. If the fiscal court wants to eliminate the squad, it might be time to do that while the boats still can be sold, he said.

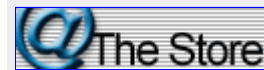
Boone County Administrator Jim Parsons plans to meet with rescue squad founder and captain Dale Appel today to discuss the situation, and get his suggestions for possible budget cuts. Parsons will make a final budget recommendation at the Fiscal Court's meeting June 24.

Appel did not return messages Tuesday seeking comment.

Appel started the squad after his best friend and his friend's father-in-law drowned in the Ohio River. He said he didn't want others to suffer



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through what he had -- days of waiting for the bodies to surface before they could be recovered.

Over the years, the squad has 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.

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

Boone County officials have looked at other options besides eliminating funding.

They 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.

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.

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 annually to support the Campbell County squad, Chief Joe Davis said.

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