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## Water rescue squad to work on budget

By Kevin Eigelbach  
 Post staff reporter

His meeting Thursday with Boone County Administrator Jim Parsons left Dale Appel feeling hopeful that he could save his Boone County Water Rescue squad from the budget-cutting ax.

Hopeful, but very challenged.

"Right now, the big question is how well I do restructuring the budget and every line item in it," said the squad's captain and founder. "I feel confident I can give the county something they'll be pleased with."

Parsons also said he felt optimistic that he and Appel could work out something to keep the squad alive.

He and Appel plan to meet again in two weeks, along with Parsons' boss, Boone County Emergency Management Director Dan Maher. Appel plans to present a proposal for substantial cuts in the squad's \$200,000 budget.

As they've prepared their budget for fiscal 2003-2004, county officials have talked of eliminating the squad or contracting with other groups to do its essential functions -- recovering bodies and finding evidence underwater.

On Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, members of the 35-person squad also patrol 60 miles of shoreline from Big Bone Creek on the Ohio River to Locust Pike on the Licking River. Trained as emergency medical technicians, they assist boaters in trouble, but lack law enforcement powers.

No other local government provides such a service, which all boaters on the river benefit from. Kenton County and Covington are the only other government entities that regularly contribute to the support of the squad, giving \$15,000 each annually.

The squad used to have a team of volunteers on call to respond to water rescue situations, but Boone Fiscal Court cut the funding for it because it was ineffective, County Judge-Executive Gary Moore said.

Moore said he felt obligated to the taxpayers to see if the county can get the same service for less cost.

Parsons said he has a target amount to cut the squad's budget by, but he would not say what it was. Appel said Parsons didn't share it with him either.

"They didn't throw out a target number," he said. "I know they want some considerable cuts. I'm trying to cut back to the bare minimum" while safely providing the same service.

He hopes to make cuts in the expense of maintaining the squad's three large and three small boats, which amounts to about \$79,000 or almost 40 percent of the annual budget.

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He had proposed replacing the two engines on one of the smaller boats, which would cost \$40,000. He may suggest replacing them with rebuilt engines instead of brand-new, he said.

Fiscal court will vote on a final reading of the new budget on June 24.

Appel, who founded the squad 36 years ago after his best friend drowned, would hate to see fiscal court dissolve it. He still feels it's something the county needs.

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