

Boat-safety laws proposed at state level

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Boaters see them all the time - novices on the waterways who constitute a danger to themselves and others.

"We see it every time we're on the water. Lack of common sense, poor judgment, no courtesy," said longtime boater Mel Goldstein.

He's seen boaters who don't know channel openings are marked - then find out the hard way when they run aground - and hot-shots who nearly capsize small sailboats when they roar past at top speed.

Goldstein, a New Rochelle sailor and retired construction consultant who teaches boat safety with the U.S. Power Squadron, said it especially pains him to hear about serious boating accidents.

"You read stories every season about fatalities caused because of ignorance," Goldstein said, and some education about boating 101 would go a long way.

In an effort to cut down on those kinds of horror stories, new state legislation to encourage boat safety was proposed yesterday. It follows an especially bad season on local waterways that has claimed several lives.

Assemblywoman Sandra Galef, D-Ossining, rolled out a legislative plan that would require powerboat users to complete a safety course.

"We want to protect lives and have a much safer river," Galef said at a news conference at the Shattemuc Yacht Club in Ossining, flanked by police officers who patrol the Hudson River.

A 25-year-old Mahopac resident Steven Vasta died July 29 after his vessel capsized north of the Bear Mountain Bridge.

A 3-year-old Brooklyn girl died Tuesday in Long Island Sound after a catamaran operated by a teenager capsized off Westport.

A series of mishaps in the waters off Ossining have also kept rescue crews busy this summer.

Galef cited the recent death on the river in pressing her case for safety classes.

"We want to ensure that tragedies such as this don't happen again," she said.

Galef's bill would mandate that boat operators obtain a safety certificate provided by the Coast Guard Auxiliary, the state Parks and Recreation Department, or the U.S. Power Squadron, a recreational and educational group. The class to receive the safety certificate takes about eight hours and costs around \$50 or less, which is often repaid by lower insurance premiums.

Boaters who have voluntarily taken such classes would not have to sign up for new instruction, and the law would slowly be phased in beginning in 2010. The law would apply to any boat that has mechanical propulsion.

New Jersey and Connecticut have similar requirements.

"This legislation would definitely help," said C.J. Westbrook, a Westchester County police detective who patrols the river. "It's kind of scary to think you can buy a boat without any kind of license at all."

The legislation is being sponsored in the state Senate by Thomas Morahan, R-New City.

Various bills mandating boat-safety classes have been in discussions at the state and Westchester County level for years, but Galef said the current circumstances in Albany were favorable for passage.

Local boaters have seen firsthand how many inexperienced pleasure seekers are out on the water.

Dietmar Choka, a Peekskill boater affiliated with the Shattemuc club, recalled running into a boater on the Hudson River who had sent out a distress call because he had gotten lost and had no idea of his location.

"I see a lot of inexperienced boaters out there. I would love to see some mandatory education," he said.

The U.S. Power Squadron also offers a free safety inspection of watercraft.

Under the law, boaters could be fined between \$100 and \$250 if they could not produce a safety certification.
