

New patrols of lakefront begin

Conservation police take over for city's marine unit

By William Recktenwald

Illinois Department of Conservation police have taken over law-enforcement duties along Chicago's lakefront and rivers, completing the controversial dissolution of the Chicago Police Department's marine unit.

Conservation Police Capt. Jim Getz said Tuesday that the force's two boats in Chicago have begun routine patrols. "We have made a commitment to the Chicago Police Department that we will increase the number of man-hours that we spend on the water in the peak boating times, primarily the weekends," he said.

The 43-member Chicago police marine unit operated six boats for nine months of the year from its headquarters in the old Coast Guard station at the mouth of the Chicago River. About half the officers were scuba divers.

The Police Department had tried for several years to get out of the marine patrols.

In 1989 one boat was turned over to the Illinois State Police, and negotiations were under way to transfer additional craft when Gov. Jim Edgar took office and disbanded the state police marine unit.

The city budget passed last year

did not include funding for a marine unit, causing an outcry from Lake Michigan boaters and others.

Officials from the Coast Guard and the National Transportation Safety Board expressed concerns that disbanding the Chicago unit would leave the lake and riverways woefully short of law enforcement personnel, particularly during major lakefront events.

"The department has not wavered on its position expressed back in January to abandon the marine unit," said Chicago Police spokesman William Davis.

Getz said the conservation police are negotiating with the city to take over one of the boats, a 42-foot craft with an aluminum hull. It is the same boat that was used by the state police.

The conservation police have 141 officers statewide.

"There are 11 of us assigned to Lake Michigan operations," Getz said. "Our responsibility is all the Illinois portion of the lake."

Conservation police currently have two craft assigned to Chicago, a 36-foot boat and a 27-foot boat.

A 36-foot boat is also assigned to Winthrop Harbor on the North

Shore. Unlike the Chicago police, conservation officers are not divers.

"In our discussions, the [Chicago] Park District has indicated that they are going to address the issue of towing disabled boats," Getz said.

The Chicago police unit had regularly towed disabled boats to harbors. The Coast Guard will tow craft only if they are in danger.

Sources at the Chicago Park District said that negotiations are under way for the district to take the five other city police boats now in dry dock.

The district sources also said lifeguard services will be beefed up and confirmed that the district may tow disabled craft.

The park district lifeguard service operates a 27-foot boat and several 22-foot craft during the summer season.

There are Coast Guard rescue stations at Wilmette and Calumet harbors. Each has a 41-foot utility craft and a smaller rescue boat.

"The bottom line from our standpoint is that law enforcement patrols on Lake Michigan and in the Chicago area river system is left in our hands," Getz said.