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Police target island Labor Day revelry

Downriver party site put off-limits to boaters

August 30, 2001

BY DENNIS NIEMIEC

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

On a privately-owned, deserted island in the Detroit River, a Labor Day tradition for more than 1,000 intruders has included the burning of a boat, public nudity, loud music and heavy drinking.

Today, a task force of police and community groups will deliver a message to the revelers: The party's over.

As part of a "Shut Down Sugar Island" operation to be unveiled today, police will place yellow tape and no-trespassing signs around the 29-acre island, Grosse Ile Detective Kenneth Pelland said Wednesday. The island is about 1,000 feet southeast of Grosse Ile.

Extra patrols also will keep boaters away through Monday night. Police said violators will be charged with trespassing, a misdemeanor punishable by up to 90 days in jail.

For about 15 years, the island has been a party spot during the Labor Day weekend, police said. But the size of the crowd has continued to grow, prompting complaints from nearby residents and reports of drunken fighting and boaters operating craft while intoxicated.

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Last year, about 1,500 people gathered for a boat-burning party that included a band, Pelland said. Included were boaters from metro Detroit, Canada and Ohio.

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A 5-minute video obtained by police from a boater shows an upright wooden boat in flames on the shore with hundreds of boats anchored near the island, Pelland said. Two naked men are shown jumping through the flames.

The ages of the revelers was believed to range from 15 to 60. Many of those drinking appeared to be underage, Pelland said.

Police said they have questioned a few Grosse Ile men who are suspected of organizing the party. There have been no arrests.

Except for the Labor Day weekend, Sugar Island is usually deserted except for families camping near the beach.

Named for its sugar maple trees, the island became a popular amusement park in the early 1900s. A plan to develop homes, picnic and beach areas was rejected by the federal government in 1960.

Purchased in the 1980s by Bill Herschler of Beverly Hills in Oakland County, the island is for sale. The asking price: \$1.9 million.

In addition to various local and Canadian police agencies, the task force involved in the shutdown includes the group Mothers Against Drunk Driving and the Prevention Coalition of Southeast Michigan, a nonprofit group promoting alcohol and drug-abuse prevention.

"This is not a little house party that is out of control," said Susan Hiltz, executive director of the coalition.

That's partly why Downriver residents say the crackdown at Sugar Island is overdue.

"It's probably more dangerous to be on the water on a holiday than on an expressway because of the drinking," said Sue Brown of Grosse Ile.

Brown said her family is hesitant to take its sailboat out at peak times.

Lt. Larry Schmoekel of the Wayne County Sheriff's Marine Division said police also will monitor other nearby islands and Crystal Bay for drunken operation of watercraft.

According to state law, it is legal for an adult to consume alcohol while operating a boat. But boaters face the same legal blood-alcohol limit for alcohol consumption, 0.10, as motorists.

Schmoekel said boating in the area of Sugar Island can be treacherous, especially for small boats, because of heavy winds, strong currents and heavy traffic at the mouth of Lake Erie.

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