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Chaos on Gull Island

Police rein in infamous party

Nonprofit arranges for trash cans, safety lane

Edward L. Cardenas / The Detroit News

ST. CLAIR SHORES – A false kidnapping scare, about a dozen injuries and nine drunken boating arrests were among the day's work for law enforcement officials patrolling the 31st annual Jobbie Nooner party on Lake St. Clair on Friday, according to the commander of St. Clair County's marine patrol.

The infamous party attracted more than 5,000 revelers and 1,000 boats, according to the county sheriff's office, which said the crowds were bigger than last year. They flocked to the four-acre, man-made Gull Island about five miles off the shore of Metro Beach and tied their vessels together to create a string of booze-soaked revelry.

A prank text message sent by a female boater to spite some friends set off a flurry of activity around 5 p.m., said Lt. William Krul. He said at first it was feared that a second girl, later learned to be adrift on a Jet Ski, had been abducted.

Police investigated for several hours before determining the incident was a misunderstanding. No charges were filed, and the names of those involved were not released by police.

"It was just a stupid act by these people on the boat who left this girl behind," Krul said.

Other than that, he said, it was a fairly normal Jobbie Nooner. Police responded to a few brawls and one unidentified young woman was cut in the face when hit with a broken beer bottle, he said, but cool evening temperatures prompted a number of boaters to depart earlier than usual.

Authorities issued numerous tickets to minors in possession of alcohol but said the complete tally won't be known until next week.

A local environmental group provided garbage cans, portable toilets and a massive floating Dumpster for the bash.

Efforts by the St. Clair Shores-based We Are Here Foundation over the past few years have helped keep the event from getting out of hand, and led to a cleaner island afterward.

This year, the foundation placed 20- and 55-gallon garbage cans along the island, and arranged for a barge to house a 30-yard-long Dumpster. Also, a safety lane was kept open near the shipping channel to allow police boats to get to and from the island.

"It is definitely keeping a lot of garbage and (human waste) from the island and the lake," said Tom Cleaver, president of nonprofit foundation, which is leasing the island from the Army Corps of Engineers.

"We are doing this as a reward for last year, because (partiers) cleaned up pretty well after themselves."

The future of the party was in doubt after the Army Corps of Engineers last year announced its intentions to sell or close the island. The foundation, which receives its funding from selling donated boats, stepped in to lease the island from the Corps.

Cleaver's group has been working to improve the island by adding volleyball courts, picnic tables and fire pits.

The improvements have been noticed by boating enthusiasts such as Jeff Sebastian, who took part in the Jobbie Nooner Friday.

According to the event's unofficial Web site, the party was started by a small group of automotive designers known as "jobbies" who wanted to take a co-worker out for his birthday. They decided to blow out of work at lunchtime one Friday, known as "pulling a nooner."

Since those days, the annual event has grown, and has grown more controversial.

"For Jobbie Nooner, people wouldn't clean up after themselves. Now, it is beautiful," said Sebastian, 24, of Warren, who visits Gull Island throughout the summer. "When it's not Jobbie Nooner, it's like being Up North but you're there in 10 minutes."

The emergency lane on the water during Friday's party was appreciated by the St. Clair County Sheriff's Office, which used it to quickly remove about a dozen people from the island who had cuts or injuries, Krul estimated.

"It has been a considerable help," he said.

You can reach Edward L. Cardenas at (586) 468-0529 or ecardenas@detnews.com.

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