

*Lakes - General
Chain of Lakes*

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Family wants to lower age for Jet Ski drivers

By Sara Isaac

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — Convinced that the Jet Ski is a "different animal" from other types of motor boats, a family is launching a campaign to lower the age limit for Jet Ski drivers on the Winter Park Chain of Lakes.

Under current city regulations, a person must be at least 15 years old to drive any boat with 10 horsepower or more.

Boat drivers under 18 must be licensed by the Winter Park Police Department.

But Tom and Emmy Lawton, along with their 13-year-old son Brett, told a workshop session of the city commission Monday that Jet Skis are different from other motor boats because the propelling mechanism is inside the vessel, out of harm's way.

The Jet Ski, which looks like a motor scooter on water, is a small, open vessel designed for one person who sits, stands or kneels.

"I don't want to let my son do anything that is an undue risk," said Lawton. But, he added, "I honestly do feel that the Jet Ski is a different animal."

Brett, who will be 14 in July, proposed that the city commission allow 13- and 14-year-olds who pass the police department's boating safety course to drive Jet Skis on the lakes.

But Officer Robert Walker of the Winter Park Boat Patrol opposed the move to lower the age limit to 13.

Winter Park may be the only city in Florida with a boating ordinance restricting operation by juveniles, and Walker said he would like to see the city maintain its high standards of safety.

"It is not much different from operating a motorcycle. It doesn't provide you with protection," he said.

"Responsibility comes with age," Walker added.

However Mrs. Lawton disagreed.

People at least 18 years old can operate any type of boat without taking a boating safety course and obtaining a license, she said.

Because Brett's proposed amendment requires a license for the younger boat drivers, the teen-agers would be thoroughly versed in boating safety — unlike many adult drivers she said she sees from her lakefront home.

The licensing requirement would allow the police department to control which youngsters can operate a Jet Ski, she added.

Though several commissioners expressed concern about lowering the age limit, the city commission agreed to draw up the proposed amendment.

A public hearing on the issue will be held at the city commission's June 28 meeting.