

Changes to dock codes in works

Inspections under scrutiny because of stray voltage that killed teen at lake

JASON DUNOVANT
The Roanoke Times

WESTLAKE — Building inspectors from the three localities surrounding Smith Mountain Lake are working together to create a uniform code for dock inspections moving forward after a teen's death in July.

Jesse Hamric, a 2024 graduate of Steamboat Springs High School in Colorado, died shortly after being rescued from the water near a dock of a lakefront home in Huddleston. According to reports, Hamric was seen in distress in the water and two witnesses jumped in the water to help him. They reported feeling as though they were being shocked as they removed him from the water.



Hamric

It is believed stray voltage in the water caused Hamric's death.

John Broughton, building official for Franklin County, discussed the changes to the inspection process with members of the Tri-County Lakes Administrative Commission on Tuesday. He said the issue of stray voltage is not new and he started working with building inspectors in 2019 to update the code, but the pandemic stalled those efforts.

"Tragically, a loss of life engaged us again," Broughton said.

Inspections were done at the dock following the incident, Broughton said. In those inspections, more than 116 volts of electricity were found to be coming off the dock's metal boat lift which was in the water at the time.

"That's like grabbing an electrical cord and jumping into the water with it," he said of the high voltage reading.

Broughton said electric shock drowning can occur in water that has as little as six volts running through it. Just enough current

Voltage

From A1

to cause paralysis of the muscles can lead to drowning.

Building inspectors and fire marshals from Franklin County, Bedford County and Pittsylvania County met shortly after the incident — each of the counties share a portion of the Smith Mountain Lake shoreline. Broughton said they met to create the more uniform code for dock inspections moving forward.

While the goal is to make docks safer, Broughton admitted that completely removing any stray electricity from the water is nearly impossible.

"Anybody that tests any electricity around any dock, you are going to find voltage," Broughton said. "I don't care if it is brand new, if it is 15 years old or 30 years old. How much voltage you find varies from dock to dock."

Building inspectors are now working together to try and reduce

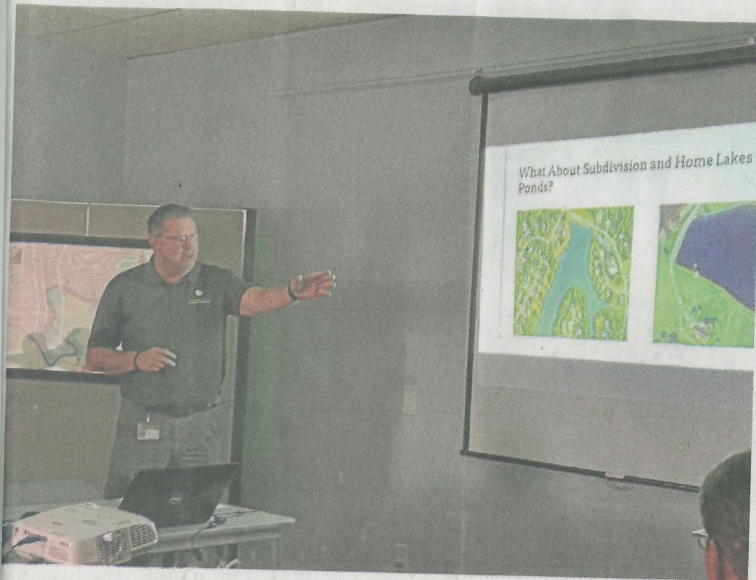
that danger as much as possible as well as warn people of hazards in the water. Broughton said this will be especially important at homes and community docks where visitors may not know about the possibility of stray voltage in the water.

Broughton said docks moving forward will be required to place signs warning of potential shock hazards. That will be to inform individuals, but they will not be restricting people from swimming in the lake.

"We're a recreational lake, we are not going to say you can't swim around your dock, but we do want you to know there is a potential for a hazard," he said.

In addition to signage, Broughton said an information sheet is being created to be distributed to give tips on how to avoid stray voltage while around a dock. He said a one-page sheet will be provided to short-term rentals that can be given to guests.

The new code moving forward will also require all metal parts



JASON DUNOVANT, THE ROANOKE TIMES

John Broughton, building official for Franklin County, discusses changes Tuesday to inspection codes for Franklin, Bedford and Pittsylvania counties. The effort comes following the death of a Colorado teen in July from what is believed to be stray voltage while swimming near a dock at Smith Mountain Lake.

on a dock that make contact with the water to connect to the grounded. The metal cradle on boat lifts is a common location for stray voltage in the water, Broughton said.

While the code changes will only impact dock inspections moving forward, Broughton said there are thousands of docks around Smith Mountain Lake with many being 40 years old or older. He encouraged dock owners to have someone inspect their dock at least every five years to ensure everything is safe.

There also could be future regulations that could require dock inspections – especially at short-term rental homes, Broughton said.

“If these folks are going to let people be on their dock, it needs to be looked at,” he said.

Bedford County is already inspecting docks using the updated code with Franklin County and Pittsylvania County planning to begin in the coming weeks, Broughton said. The safety tip sheet should be available in the next two to three weeks, he said.

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