

Holden Water Rescue Team Ready For Action

BY DOUG RUTTER

If a boat sinks off Holden Beach next week and fishermen need assistance, the community's newly-established water rescue team will be ready to lend a helping hand.

The team—made up of 10 volunteer firemen, rescue squad members and town police officers—has been prepared for water rescue since Oct. 1.

Holden Beach officials and community residents started developing the water rescue program last summer in response to five drownings that occurred in a three-month period.

Three men drowned in late May after their fishing boat sank off Shallotte Inlet. Two swimmers drowned near the west end of the island in separate incidents in July and August.

Holden Beach Commissioners voted about three months ago to spend up to \$15,000 on equipment, training and operating costs for a water rescue program.

Town Manager Gary Parker said the program has received a lot of community support. "It's a very proactive program, and hopefully we can avoid some of the problems we've had in the past," he said.

Keith Sawyer, a volunteer fireman who has spearheaded the effort to form the water safety team, said the group is trained and equipped and ready to go.

Although the water rescue team was started with town funds and is tied closely to the town, Parker said it is not a part of the town's administrative structure.

"It's their program to run with," Parker said. "But there wouldn't be a program probably if there wasn't a partnership."

Sawyer said that relationship between the rescue team and town will probably continue for at least the next year. At that time, it will be evaluated to see if any changes should be made.

All 10 members of the water rescue team have been certified in boat-based and surf rescue. They represent Tri-Beach Volunteer Fire Department, Coastline Volunteer Rescue Squad and the Holden Beach Police Department.

Besides Sawyer, team members are Ronnie Rabon, Robert Cook, Ted Lane Helms, Clarence Thornton Jr., Jerry Lee Wilson, Herbert Varnum, Roy Douglas Todd



FOUR WETSUITS are donated to the Holden Beach water rescue team by Danny Liebl (right), manager of Holden Beach Marina. Also pictured are rescue team member Keith Sawyer (left) and Town Manager Gary Parker.

Jr., Robert McLeod and Jonathan McLeod.

The town has purchased a rescue patrol boat that can be launched from the surf as well as communications equipment, life jackets, helmets and other items which are being stored at the Holden Beach police station.

Sawyer said the water rescue team will use the boat for rescues in the ocean, inlets and waterway and plans to patrol waters around Holden Beach on major holiday weekends.

Rescue team members and town officials agree that

the program won't work unless the public is educated about the potential dangers of ocean swimming and boating.

At each public beach access, the town has posted information about rip currents, which are strong, narrow surface currents that flow out from the beach.

Sawyer said the team hopes to get public safety announcements on radio and television and wants to eventually have water safety taught in the schools.

"The ideal situation is to have a fully-trained water rescue team and never have to call them out," said Danny Liebl, manager of Holden Beach Marina.

Sawyer said the team members intend to get together at least once a month to train and refresh their skills.

Some water rescue personnel might take phase three of the water rescue course next month, and more training is being planned next spring.

Sawyer said five county residents, including himself, are working toward becoming certified to teach the first phase of the water rescue course.

In addition to the water rescue team, Parker said town officials may consider employing lifeguards or using flags on the strand to warn swimmers of dangerous swimming conditions.

"Some places are already doing that and we may want to do it here," the town manager said.

Besides financial backing from the town, the water rescue team has received donations of money and equipment and discounts from businesses that sell equipment.

Sawyer said the team has received about \$22,000 worth of equipment, training and services, but only \$14,000 has been spent.

Holden Beach Marina recently donated four wetsuits for rescuers to use in the off-season. Gary and Alfa Carr, who run a charter fishing boat, gave 20 neon yellow T-shirts so the rescue team members can be easily recognized.

Sawyer said no donation is too small. "Every one of the team members has pulled money out of their own pocket," he said. "They believe in it strongly enough to outfit themselves."

People interested in becoming involved in the water rescue program or donating money or equipment can call Holden Beach Town Hall, 842-6488.

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