

A St. Petersburg police officer talks with model power boaters this past weekend after a complaint was called in from the nearby neighborhood.



FRED FOX/Tribune photos

MAKING WAVES

A lively water war has erupted between model boat hobbyists and homeowners who live near Ruby Lake.

By CARLOS MONCADA
of The Tampa Tribune

ST PETERSBURG

It was a fine day for boating. A gentle breeze. A clear, blue sky. The boats, their sleek hulls reflecting in the sunlight, cut across the placid, unruled water while their skippers maneuvered the crafts around a makeshift course.

The skippers, though, stood not on the decks of their boats but along the grassy shoreline of Ruby Lake in north-central St. Petersburg, twiddling radio transmitters.

The half-dozen or so men had come from Seminole, Largo, even Hillsborough County to race their boats — creations lovingly crafted by hand.

Models of speedboats three feet in length or longer, they zoom across the city-owned lake — actually a large drainage pond — at speeds up to 50 mph.

Their owners are middle-aged or older men who as little boys once assembled model airplanes or raced toy cars.

“Try being in the middle of your sleep, and it sounds like somebody hacking away at trees outside your window.”

Angela Riskowitz
Lake neighbor

Several residents say the noise created by the fuel-powered, remote-control boats is unbearable. They want the city to ban them from the pond, behind a Kmart on 35th Street, between Benson Avenue and 26th Street.

Homeowner Robert Burger, who has complained about the miniature boats for more than two years, compared the noise to “a bunch of chain saws going.”

“You can’t go over there and read a book or take your grandkids over there,” he said. “It scares my grandkids to death.”

Model-boat enthusiasts, who are allowed to use the pond two days a week, counter that the noise is no worse than someone mowing a lawn or cutting down a tree.

“For the amount of time we may be offering a little bit of disturbance to some people, it’s not a lot of time your windows are closed, and your air-conditioner is going,” Largo hobbyist Steve Laymon said.

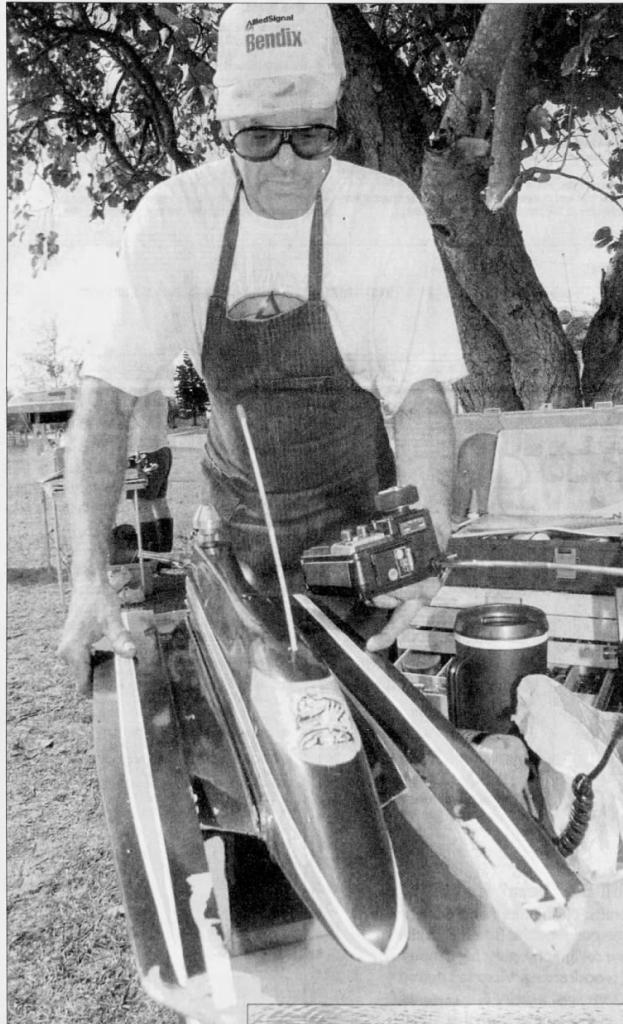
The enthusiasts are members of the nonprofit International Model

Power Boat Association. They use the rectangular-shaped pond, primarily on Saturdays, to test their boats for competition in sanctioned races, or simply to enjoy their hobby.

While St. Petersburg has regulations on model airplanes, it has no rules restricting the use of radio-controlled model boats on city property.

Tests conducted by police have shown the buzz from the boats does not exceed the 75-decibel limit in the city’s noise pollution ordinance. But that’s only because the sound must persist for at least eight minutes for a violation to occur.

See BOATS, Page 11 ▶



Steve Laymon, above, gets his model boat ready for a zip around Ruby Lake in St. Petersburg this past weekend. At right, the Largo resident retrieves the craft after its run. The noise of the boats has been a source of friction with nearby residents living around the lake.

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