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Palm Beach County: No more boat parties

Broward County officials don't see similar problem

Boaters gather near Stranahan River in Fort Lauderdale on Sunday. Palm Beach County has banned recreational boating activities. (John McCall/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

By Austen Erblat and Anthony Man

In an attempt to crack down on the spread of the new coronavirus, Palm Beach County officials have banned recreational boating activities indefinitely, citing parties and other large gatherings on the water.

Palm Beach County's directive comes within a day of a similar ban in Miami-Dade County in response to large offshore gatherings on Saturday and advertising for a "sandbar party" on Sunday.

In Broward County, however, officials have not banned recreational boating activities. At a news conference on Sunday evening, Broward Mayor Dale Holness said they have no immediate plans to enact a similar ban but will consider it if boaters continue to gather en masse.

"We haven't crossed that threshold yet," he said.

Palm Beach County took a more direct approach with regards to keeping boaters home.

"Effective immediately, all boat ramps and marinas will be closed to all recreational boating activities to include boat launching, in/out storage activities, and boat rentals in Palm Beach County until further notice," the county said in a news release Sunday.

The ban will be enforced by the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, among other agencies.

"Closures are being ordered in Palm Beach County and counties to the south to prevent large group gatherings and to protect the health of residents during this emergency. Current guidelines call for gatherings to be limited to groups of 10 or fewer with social distancing of six feet apart. These actions are necessary to slow the community spread of COVID-19," the statement read.

According to the county, commercial fishing and commercial marine operations may continue to operate, along with marina supply, fueling and other activities necessary to support those industries.

Among the areas that inspired the move, and those impacted, were Lake Boca in Boca Raton, Phil Foster Park near West Palm Beach and Burt Reynolds Park in Jupiter.

“While Lake Boca Raton has always served as a social gathering spot for many boaters, and will again, now is not the time for parties and tie ups on the water,” Boca Raton Police Department tweeted. “Please be patient, and do your part, so we can all get through this together.”

Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez also ordered the closure of all boat ramps and marinas in the county Sunday after images appeared on social media showed large groups gathering for offshore parties on Saturday and advertising for a “sandbar party” on Sunday — violating the spirit of coronavirus precautions.

“I am disappointed to see photos and videos on social media of boats close together and large groups of people congregating,” Gimenez said in a statement in which he called out the advertising for a planned party as “truly disheartening, but mostly worrisome.”

Gimenez was critical of those flouting guidelines limiting gatherings to groups of 10 or fewer. “We are in a state of emergency, and I cannot stress enough the need for personal responsibility,” he said. “These sacrifices in our social lives are critical NOW in order to defeat COVID-19. Those of you not following these guidelines are putting others at risk, perhaps your own family and friends. And, you could be contributing to a much longer scenario and further shutdowns in our community.”

Gimenez said the Miami-Dade Police Department would be patrolling on water. He said he wanted to stop “rafting up” — the tying together of a number of small vessels to form a raft-like structure — and the resulting large group parties that were taking place.

Gimenez announced the restriction shortly before midnight Saturday and said it would go into effect immediately.

Commercial fishermen who provide food for restaurants and markets are exempt, he said.

Jared Moskowitz, the state director of emergency management, said Sunday that just because people can do something doesn’t mean they should. “Social distancing works. Even if something is open still doesn’t mean you have to go to it.”

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