

Local township turns to technology in effort to protect life rings

BY RONDA HOWELL

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Protecting the lives of young people is at the heart of a recently completed project on the White River side of the White Lake channel.

"After the young man (Chris Smith) drowned last fall, I began doing a little research," said Holly Hughes, a White River Township trustee. "I've talked with people up and down the Great Lakes and I know that the White Lake area isn't the only harbor town facing a dilemma with life ring thefts."

Hughes said although she found a lot of dead ends in her search to find a theft-proof solution for rings at the White Lake channel, she never gave up hope.

"I knew that there had to be a way to alert someone if a ring is stolen, whether it is a microchip in a ring that can be tracked by GPS (global position satellite) or something else," she said. "I knew I couldn't figure out how to do it, but I knew someone who could."

Tim Korthase, of Top Rail/PowerLink Plus in Montague got a call from Hughes asking him to do some research on a solution.

"We're doing a similar project for the Mackinac Bridge Authority," he said. "After looking at a lot of possibilities, this was the project that made sense for this location."

Korthase said six of the life rings on the north side of the channel wall are connected through an electronic wire. PowerLink Plus donated the labor and equipment to install and bury the line.

The three rings on the outer jetty wall are equipped with a wireless monitoring system, he said.

Hughes said the system is set to call a monitoring company, Video-Tech-Tronics. That company will call the township's constable to alert him that a life ring has been removed and needs to be replaced.

Hughes noted that the effort sponsored by White River Township is a pilot program that the township and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is going to watch closely over the year.

"We've been told by the Corps that this is a project that will be closely watched over this first year," said Hughes.

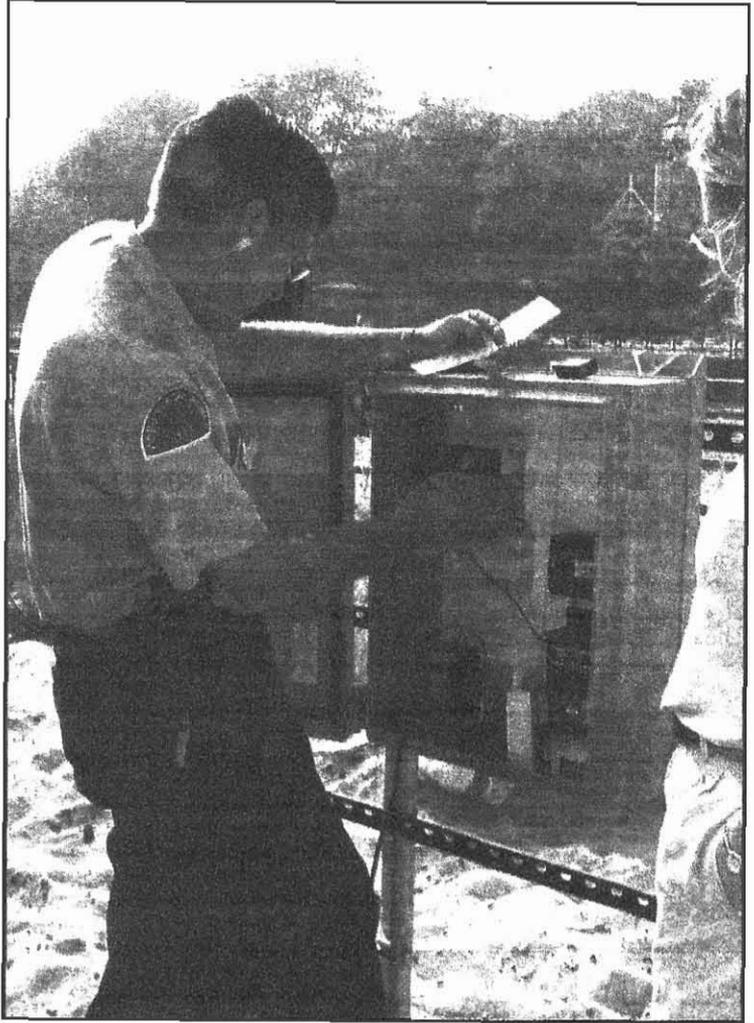
Patrick Klever, Chief of Operation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Grand Haven, said he is encouraged by the effort of communities trying to find a solution for stolen life rings.

"There is a lot of talking taking place along the harbors, a lot of people with good ideas are communicating. We're seeing Michigan City doing a similar project to the one White River just installed." Klever said technology is expanding to a point where it soon will be feasible to have much better security on life saving devices in public places.

"What we don't want to see are prudent life saving measures be completely discontinued because of fear of litigation," said Klever. "We discourage frivolous lawsuits aimed at legitimate and reasonable efforts to save lives, even if those efforts are imperfectly done. The alternative is to do nothing," he said.

Hughes said she contacted the Community Foundation for Muskegon County when seeking funding for the program.

"We were fortunate. There was an anonymous donor all ready to help with a project like



Beacon photo

David Ackerman of Video-Tech-Tronics completes installation of the life ring protection system established in White River Township. Township Trustee Holly Hughes looks on as the control box is completed.

this one," she said. The JASAM Fund of the Community Foundation provided a \$3,470 grant for the life ring safety system.

Officials said if rings are stolen or vandalized and the perpetrator is caught and convicted, that individual or individuals may face up to 93 days in jail and a fine of not more than \$500, or both.

Hughes said Master Tag is preparing to print warning signs that have pictures of drowning victims Catherine Porter and Chris Smith. Porter drowned in the late 1980s after falling through ice on the channel while she was feeding and photographing ducks. Smith drowned in September, 2000 after jumping off the south jetty wall with a friend.

Mike Cockerill, White River Township supervisor, said educational efforts are starting to pay off where life rings are concerned.

"We have had rings turned in to us, and we have seen some teens let us know that their peers have taken life rings so we've

been able to retrieve that property," he said.

Officials at Fruitland Township recently decided to see how the monitoring system works in White River. Hughes said the system is designed to add Fruitland rings at a future date if it operates successfully.

Greg Boughton, Fruitland Township supervisor, said he believes the board will make a decision in the spring about connecting if White River finds the system works successfully.<