



City gets proactive about invasive species

The Whitefish City Council is considering a boat inspection program with the goal of keeping aquatic invasive species out of Whitefish Lake.

By Heidi Desch

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The Whitefish City Council is considering a boat inspection program with the goal of keeping aquatic invasive species out of Whitefish Lake.

The council discussed a possible inspection program at a work session June 18. No formal vote was taken on the matter.

Several councilors seemed to favor beginning immediately, but noted that without money in the budget the earliest a program could start is next summer.

“This is one situation where the consequences are everything,” councilor Bill Kahle said. “This is the crown jewel of our town and we don’t want to lose that.”

The council did ask the parks department to begin giving out expanded educational brochures on invasive species at City Beach.

Councilor Richard Hildner said a delay in starting the full program shouldn’t stop some immediate measures.

“We need to start the education and outreach now,” he said. “We need to begin planning now to implement a strategy so we can have something firm by next summer.”

The city started taking a closer look at boat inspections after vessels from the BNSF oil cleanup project were found to have fragments of zebra mussels during a state inspection process before they were launched into the lake. Aquatic invasive species have become an increasing concern for the state.

“The threat is real,” Mike Koopal with Whitefish Lake Institute said. “Zebra mussels and watermilfoil are the most likely threats. There is an economic impact and lifestyle impact if they get in the lake. The key here is to have some vision for prevention rather than trying to treat them.”

The institute presented information to the council about what a city prevention and inspection program might look like.

Concerns were also raised that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks inspection stations might not catch all boaters headed from out-of-state and in particular those traveling from Canada to Whitefish Lake. An inspection station in Eureka is located on Highway 37 and is for westbound traffic only. There is no check station between the border crossing at Sweet Grass and Whitefish. The number of stations is largely determined by available funding.

The original suggestion to have a boat inspection site at City Beach also raised concerns that boaters turned away from City Beach might put in at another launch on the lake.

Councilor Frank Sweeney suggested that an inspection station on U.S. Highway 93 might be a better location in an attempt to stop more boaters.

“Then it doesn’t matter which boat launch they go to,” he said. “I’m just staggered that the state isn’t taking a more proactive approach to this.”

Mayor John Mulfeld did indicate he has spoken with FWP representatives and there might be the possibility of working together to create a Whitefish check station.

“They are interested in partnering with us,” he said.

Dave Landstrom, FWP Region One parks manager, said the city and FWP will need to work together on the issue. An inspection station at City Beach could create an issue as boats attempt to avoid inspection by using State Park, he noted.

“We have a lot more details to discuss, but there’s certainly an interest on our part,” Landstrom said.

The institute’s program outline includes education information and boat inspections. The institute recommends placing a tutorial video on the city’s website that after viewed would allow operators to earn a “Clean Boater” sticker granting them a quicker review at the inspection site.

Level I and Level II inspections of boats would be performed before they enter the water and a two-minute exit inspection would be conducted upon leaving the lake. The Level I inspection is two to five minutes and would be done for those with “Clean Boater” stickers and Montana residents with boats trailers with state registration. Level II, a five to 30 minute inspection, is for out-of-state operators, boats with standing water and boats that have been in known infested waters in the past 30 days. Inspections include examining the hull of the boat both visually and tactilely, inspecting motor areas, trailers and vehicles, ensuring the boat is drained and inspecting bait and live wells.

Parks and Recreation Director Karl Cozad prepared a report that shows six employees would be needed to handle an inspection program. It’s estimated cost is \$43,200 to inspect boats May 1 through the end of October. Boats would be inspected from 11 to 15 hours per day based on daylight hours. Limited space at the City Beach boat launch could force the inspection to be located at another site. A vacant lot south of Piggy Back BBQ would be one option, though it could cause boaters to avoid the intersection to circumvent inspection.

The council asked if the city has the jurisdiction to inspect boats. City Attorney Mary VanBuskirk said the city can inspect boats under its land use and zoning authority since the lake is in the city limits. However before beginning a program, the city would need to establish an ordinance with set protocol and what happens if invasive species are found.

The city has the authority to turn away a boat from city beach, but not the authority to detain a boat. For boats found to be infected, FWP would have to be contacted. If an inspection program comes to fruition, Whitefish would likely be the first city in the state to create such a program.