

Lakes Conference unites municipalities

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By JACOB DORAN

Bigfork Eagle

Officers of the Flathead Basin Commission said they were please with the amount of interest and participation generated by last week's Lessons of the Lakes conference, which was held at the Kwa-Taqu-Nuk resort, in Polson.

The two-day conference, which was co-sponsored by the Flathead Basin Commission, Flathead Lakers and Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes, brought together more than 200 elected officials, municipality heads and citizens from North Dakota to California as well as the Canadian province of Alberta.

Representatives of federal, state, local and tribal governments joined members of grassroots organizations and industry leaders like Plum Creek and JTL Group in discussing present threats to water quality and the tools available to local governments for protecting the valuable resources so important to lake-based communities.

Flathead and Lake Counties, along with CSKT government each boasted a strong representation at the conference, with two Lake County commissioners, two Flathead County commissioners, and multiple members of both the Flathead County Planning Board and Flathead County Planning and Zoning Office staff in attendance. CSKT council chairman James Steele Jr. also attended the conference on Wednesday, and several other tribal and council members attended both days.

The conference opened with an introduction from Flathead Basin Commission chairman Rich Moy, Flathead Lakers president Dan Barz, CSKT chairman Steele and Senator John Brueggeman of the Montana state legislature.

Promoting Water Quality Amidst Community Growth served as a theme for the conference, as well as the basis of each session. However, Flathead Lake was not the only lake discussed during the event.

Lake Tahoe, Lake Couer D'Alene, as well as Whitefish and Swan lakes each entered into the discussion, with a dominant emphasis on large lakes. Authoritative speakers from Nevada and Idaho noted similarities between development in the Lake Tahoe and Lake Couer D' Alene areas and the rapid growth that is now occurring in the Flathead, detailing the challenges of managing pollution and protecting water quality in those lake communities that are quickly transitioning into resort communities.

Among the speakers whom guests said were most interesting and relevant to the needs of Flathead Lake, John Singlaub, executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency explained the TRPA's efforts to bring together the two states (California and Nevada), five counties and one incorporated city, who have united to help manage growth in the Tahoe area, as well as its effect on the lake.

In fact, more than 50 agencies have planned and implemented projects to improve water quality in the Tahoe basin.

According to Singlaub, septic systems were banned by 1969 and were replaced with a complex sewer system, which pumps waste outside the basin. However, he added that the development of the lake has produced a number of serious impacts on the lake, which go beyond waste management.

For one, the introduction of lake trout and kokanee salmon has negatively impacted native species in the lake. Storm water runoff from the growing number of impervious surfaces has also become an issue, as development has continued to occur, to the point where the lakefront is presently nearing full build-out.

In the 60's, Lake Tahoe boasted visibility to a depth of 100 ft. Today, that visibility has been reduced to about 68 ft. Singlaub said he considered the recover the pre-1960's clarity of the lake to be a top concern.

Singlaub added that a general perception that all development is good, combined with a lack of understanding when it comes to the impacts of development on water quality, has led to the current state of compromised water quality in Lake Tahoe. This has been the case in numerous, rapidly growing areas, which are located near large lakes, throughout the United States.

Consequently, Singlaub encouraged municipalities and governing bodies to tell developers, who require changes to the existing regulations in order to complete their projects, "Let me show you the door."

Besides Singlaub, the director of the Couer D' Alene Tribe's Lake Management Department, Phil Cernera, presented information in regard to the conflicts and challenges experienced in the attempt to implement Superfund work aimed at the cleanup of mining pollution that, for the better part of a century, drained into the lake.

Presently, about 75 million tons of contamination have accumulated on the lakebed, he reported. These heavy metals and pollutants could eventually resurface, as a result of increased nutrient flows.

Cernera further stated that legal battles with the state of Idaho over management jurisdiction on

the lake have been ongoing for years and led to a 2001 ruling by the Supreme Court, which granted tribal jurisdiction over the lower third of the lake. Today, 25 stakeholders have joined the tribe in an effort to develop a workable lake management plan.

Other popular speakers at the lakes conference included Drs. Ric Hauer and Bonnie Ellis, of the University of Montana's Flathead Lake Biological Station and Dr. Eileen Ryce of the Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Also on program were CSKT land use planning director Janet Camel, Whitefish Lake Institute executive director Mike Koopal, Montana Department of Environmental Quality director Robert Opper and Kate Miller of the DEQ's Public Water Supply & Subdivision Bureau.

Of course, the biggest name at the conference—and bearer of the speech that brought the widest range of reactions—was Montana's governor, Brian Schweitzer.

Although Schweitzer touched upon the challenges associated with trans-boundary issues, like those currently facing Montana and British Columbia, as well as the role of the Flathead Basin Commission, the main thrust of Schweitzer's speech was the need for officials in local government to step up and take responsibility for implementing appropriate measures that protect water quality.

Schweitzer stressed the fact that growth in the Flathead Valley cannot be stopped, at this point, even if planners built a fence to keep people out.

"If we build a 12 ft. fence around this area, they'll show up with a 14 ft. ladder," Schweitzer said.

Consequently, he called on voters to keep hold their elected officials accountable to protect what is important to them. He also accused local legislators of voting against legislation that would protect water quality by establishing stream and waterway setbacks—a statement that some local representatives said was misleading.

Flathead Basin Commission executive director Caryn Mitske believed that there was some merit in what the Governor had to say.

"Certainly, the Governor has been a great supporter of the work that Flathead Basin Commission has done, in recent years, in regard to the role that we have taken in trans-boundary issues" Mitske said. "He said pretty much what I expected him to say about what we've done.

"Governor Schweitzer also gave a call to action for local officials and voters. He basically said to go and talk to the people representing you. Let them know what you feel about these issues. Elected officials represent their constituents. If constituents don't communicate to their elected officials about what's important to them and what they want to see happen, it doesn't happen. If people don't participate in a democracy, then the system and the democracy fail. I think that the Governor did good job of bringing out that point."

Miske said that both the speakers and guests who attended the conference were a true representational group of individuals.

"We really did reach all of our target area, and our target area was the decision makers who make the laws and decisions that directly effect water quality in the lake and watershed. I was very pleased with the turnout and response."

Miske said she believed the conference was successful in accomplishing the purpose for which it was conceived by the various organizations responsible for the event. Organizers brought in speakers from the Big Hole Basin, as well as Idaho, Oregon and Lake Tahoe, in the hope of introducing new insights and new tools for managing water quality throughout the Flathead River Basin.

She stressed the need to establish a cooperative effort between various municipalities, to develop better, more effective measures of lake management, which she hoped that each of the local governing bodies would view a major priority, despite the obvious challenge.

"Clearly, if we don't get our land use planning in hand, we are not going to be able to restore Flathead Lake to its 1977 condition. The goal here—and the underlying goal of the each portion of the conference—is to reduce sediment and nutrient loads by addressing land use planning, storm water management and other issues related to growth and development."