

# OPINION

## ALS program aims to protect Whitefish Lake

A comprehensive local program to prevent the transfer of zebra mussels to Whitefish Lake will begin May 1. Community and visitors alike will need to take the time to understand the new regulations, have their watercraft inspected, and possibly even have it decontaminated.

The program was developed with the intent of minimizing inconvenience to the public, while providing the requisite layer of protection for Whitefish Lake against the zebra mussel threat. If left unaddressed, Whitefish Lake would have a much higher potential for a zebra mussel or other aquatic invasive infestation. An infestation would lead

to irreversible negative effects to our ecosystem, economy and recreational pursuits. It's clear from U.S. economic case studies where zebra mussels exist that the money spent in prevention is a fraction of mitigation costs and long-term losses.

Whereas no prevention program can claim to be 100 percent effective, this local plan, when layered with the State of Montana plan, provides the best risk management for the issue short of total watercraft use restrictions.

The program calls for watercraft inspection stations at City Beach and Whitefish State Park from May 1 through Sept. 30 with expanded staffing hours and a watercraft

decontamination station located at Whitefish Marine & Powersports on Highway 93. Nonmotorized hand launched watercraft can obtain an annual sticker after completing an on-line certification on the City of Whitefish website. After the staffed inspection calendar window (Oct. 1- April 30), motorized watercraft users will be able to take the same online certification to receive the lock code for use at City Beach.

To create this program, it took the cooperation of the city of Whitefish, the Whitefish Lake Institute, and many other partners. City staff from all departments worked diligently to collaborate and bring this program to fruition. City

Council had to address the program's budgetary needs mid-fiscal year — not an easy task for a municipal government.

Other project partners have contributed to the program to the tune of \$120,000. Special thanks to the Whitefish Community Foundation for funding the purchase of a decontamination station, Joe and Cindy Gregory for covering construction costs of the City Beach Watercraft Inspection Station, Montana Department of Natural Resources Conservation for a grant to assist in staffing the Whitefish State Park station, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Whitefish Water and Sewer District, Flathead

Conservation District and The Lodge at Whitefish Lake to fund education and outreach and other aspects of the program.

Creating a prevention strategy for aquatic invasive species is not an easy management scenario but there's no doubt that our community has deftly responded to this issue. Our lake is our future. Keep your eyes on upcoming issues of the Whitefish Pilot where we will communicate program details to you.

*Mike Koopal is the founder and executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute.*