

# Whitefish Pilot

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## City approves AIS program

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Whitefish Pilot

The city of Whitefish will implement a full scale aquatic invasive species prevention program for Whitefish Lake beginning May 1.

The plan includes increased watercraft inspection hours at City Beach and gating of the boat launch to ensure only inspected boats enter the lake. In addition, the city will fund a city-run watercraft inspection station for Whitefish Lake State Park and be involved with an off-site decontamination station for boats.

"I think everyone in this state recognizes the importance of Whitefish Lake and the threat posed by AIS," Councilor Richard Hildner said. "It's incumbent upon us to do everything we possibly can to forestall the introduction of AIS into the watershed."

The Whitefish Lake Institute

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developed the expanded aquatic invasive species plan to prevent the spread of zebra mussels to the lake and surrounding waterbodies. It recommended the city adopt the plan after waterbodies east of the Continental Divide this fall tested positive or had suspect results for zebra mussels.

"This will provide the most comprehensive zebra and quagga mussel program in the state," Whitefish Lake Institute Executive Director Mike Koopal said. "This program is targeting mussels contamination, but it also addresses other threats in the Flathead Basin."

City Council March 20 approved spending up to almost \$140,000 on the new plan.

Council gave approval of spending \$34,000 for City Beach and \$19,000 for State Park to begin the expanded watercraft inspection program on May 1 and running it through the end of the fiscal year on June 30. The City Beach program is considered budget neutral because other savings in staffing will be applied to the cost of the inspection station.

Council also approved funding both inspection stations for July, August and September, which is part of fiscal year 2018, to complete this year's boating season. The cost for the city Beach station is roughly \$41,000 and the State Park is about \$27,000.

For several years now, boats entering the water at City Beach have had to pass an AIS inspection to launch. The proposal looks to extend the inspection window from May 1 to Sept. 30 compared to the current operation of Memorial Day to Labor Day. Staffing hours would also be expanded to run from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. during the peak summer season.

Users could have their boat sealed upon exiting the lake to avoid re-inspection upon returning. Those wanting to launch from Sept. 30 to May 1, would be required to pass an online certification.

As part of the plan, the boat launch would be chained-off when the inspection station is not open and a notice posted that the launch is closed. Montana Fish, Wildlife

and Parks has agreed to allow for the city-staff boat inspection station to operate at Whitefish Lake State Park. Inspections would run May 1 to Oct. 1 from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Dave Landstrom, regional state parks manager, said FWP has concerns about how the inspection station will operate at State Park and how it might create congestion in the park, but it is committed to the first season of the program. He noted the park sees about 100,000 visitors each year, but how many launch boats is unknown.

"Consider us a willing partner at State Park," he said. "We will be committed to working with you on it for this first year."

Parks and Recreation Director Maria Butts said plans for an increase in the number of inspection stations around the state should reduce the number of boats inspected at City Beach and State Park. The city expects to have reciprocity with state stations and boats sealed at those stations would be allowed to launch into the lake without being inspected.

"We are surrounded by inspection stations," she said. "The people we need to inspect are in the Flathead Valley. We think the number of inspections should be less than we did last year."

In April Council is also expected to vote on an ordinance that would prohibit the launch of boats in Whitefish Lake without being inspected or undergoing decontamination for high risk watercraft. Those who launch without inspection could be cited with a misdemeanor.

**Prior to the vote,** City Manager Adam Hammatt cautioned Council that adding the inspection station at State Park increases the city's expenses, while expanding hours of inspections at City Beach would be budget neutral.

"Adding a second station doesn't mean any more boats would be inspected — it would be for the convenience of the boats," he said. "All boats would have to be inspected before launching and city staff believes that can all be handled at City Beach."

Koopal said the two

inspection stations were designed to mitigate the wait time for boats.

"This is the first year of a complex program and we don't know how many watercraft will go through City Beach and State Park," he said. "We hate to see a decrease of the user experience."

Councilor Frank Sweeney said while there is budget concerns with funding two stations, he isn't willing to risk the health of the lake.

"We don't understand the depth of the problem with the number of boats and also cycling them all through City Beach could be a mess," he said. "We need to make a commitment to this year for two stations, and maybe we don't need two in the future."

**Council also made a commitment to help fund an education and outreach program at a cost**

of \$6,000. The program includes brochures, signs and advertising explaining the program and requirement of inspections to launch.

Councilor Katie Williams said education is a key piece of the puzzle.

"We spend all of this on the program and public outreach is paramount to the success of this program this especially as we work through this first year," she said.

The Whitefish Lake Institute estimates the cost of implementing a fullscale watercraft inspection and decontamination program for Whitefish Lake at more than \$235,000 for the first season. The institute has secured or has pledges from a number of partners in the amount of \$118,000 and is working to secure additional funds. Those partners that have committed

funds include FWP, the Whitefish Community Foundation, the Joe and Cindy Gregory Family, Montana Department Natural Resources and Conservation, the Flathead Conservation District and the Lodge at Whitefish Lake.

As part of the program, the institute is coordinating with Whitefish Marine & Powersports on U.S. Highway 93 South to install a decontamination station. High risk watercraft, including those with ballast tanks or bags, would be required to undergo decontamination before launching into the lake.

Council agreed to provide up to \$11,200 in funding for staffing of the station, if necessary. The institute has secured funding to create the station including a pledge from Whitefish Marine & Powersports, but doesn't know the exact operating

costs for the station until completing the first season.

Koopal requested that the city be willing to cover staffing costs for the station, if the planned \$40 per boat fee for decontamination and donations don't cover estimated costs.

Koopal says a zebra mussel colonization could have long-reaching economic and environmental consequences for Whitefish and the lake.

Zebra mussels could plug the city's municipal water intake pipe in Mountain Harbor and eventually be pumped into the water treatment plant, clogging infrastructure and "leaving Whitefish residents without drinking water," he noted. Individual property could be damaged, recreation experience reduced, and the ecology and water quality of the lake would suffer.

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