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City explores septic cleanup solutions

By HEIDI DESCH Whitefish Pilot

The City of Whitefish is considering how it might assist in cleaning up septic pollution in Whitefish Lake.

The Whitefish Lake Institute released a study in March that confirmed septic contamination in the lake. Although the lake is considered safe, the Institute recommends a concerted cleanup effort.

Institute executive director Mike Koopal set out a number of options for city council during a workshop session May 7. Mayor John Muhlfeld and councilor Phil Mitchell were not present at the meeting.

“We want to present you with a scenario of what your options might look like should the council decide to take action,” Koopal said. “The whole intent here is to help prevent septic leachate from degrading water quality from both an ecological perspective and from a human health component.”

Several councilors seemed receptive to finding a plan that would remove the failing septic tanks.

“We have a problem,” councilor Chris Hyatt said. “We all know this and we have to solve that.”

The Institute study found contamination at City Beach bay, at Viking Creek and Lazy Bay. It also designates a few areas as being at-risk for future contamination.

The Institute estimates that about 600 septic systems are located within a quarter-mile of the lake. Modern septic systems, those created after 1990, use technology advancements, but many older septic systems along the lake appear to be failing.

Koopal outlined several options for dealing with failing septic systems that include education, septic testing, a long-term and short-term incentive based approach, a neighborhood replacement, annexation or a combination of solutions.

“The objective here is to provide short-term incentives with a long-term action plan to address the issue,” he said.

Under the education and outreach approach, the city would work to inform residents of potential problems and encourage them to test and replace septic tanks. Effectiveness is likely fairly low, Koopal noted, with this option because those who are violators wouldn't be forced to upgrade.

"If a person is interested in doing the right thing, they might do the right thing," he said. "Those that are violators might not engage in the voluntary process."

A second option would be to perform site specific testing and evaluation that would determine which septic systems need replacement. This option could be done in conjunction with an incentive program, but would be done by requiring owners to upgrade.

Koopal noted that more study is needed to determine which specific septic systems are failing.

"We found the generalized areas, but to get down to the granular level you have to do more inspection and review records," he said.

The umbrella policy sets up a short-term and long-term incentive-based option. Under the short-term, the policy would ask for voluntarily hook up to a new septic tank, communal system or city service where possible. In the long-term, after 2015 upon the sale of the property all septic systems installed before 1990 would be forced into one of the same three options.

"The city might consider something that they could do toward helping this scenario," Koopal said. "The city might set an amount — say \$5,000 — toward replacing a homeowner's septic."

Kahle said homeowners might be more likely to test knowing the city can provide assistance.

"We need a comprehensive plan," Kahle said. "We need to be ready with an incentive once we test those septic systems."

The fourth approach looks at the neighborhood level by targeting geographic locations and creating rural special improvement districts to help fund replacement in sections along the lake.

Koopal noted that the different options all take time to replace the failing septic systems.

"We want the water quality cleaned up as soon as possible, but we recognize that we don't live in a perfect world," he said.

The council seemed to agree that the best approach might be to focus on the confirmed and high-risk areas first.

"We need a targeted approach to those areas," councilor Bill Kahle said. "We need to contact the people in those areas."

Rough estimates for an individual lot owner to upgrade their septic tank range from \$12,000 up to \$25,000 depending on the system used.

As a case scenario, the Institute points out that if 300 properties were given a \$5,000 incentive to change their septic that equates to \$1.5 million.

Ultimately the Institute suggested the council form a committee to further study solutions.

"This is an issue that touches a lot of community members personally," Koopal said. "It needs to be vetted. It could start with an ad-hoc committee and then move to the planning board and the council."

Flathead County Health Director Joe Russell attended the meeting and said the county welcomes working on the septic tank issue.

"I would like you to put me out of business for septic tanks near the lake," he said. "We would like to see practical group systems or to encourage hookup to the city."

Russell said the county data base can assist with determining which septic tanks are failing.

"We are the regulators," Russell said. "We need to go out there and make the identifications. Unless this is a voluntary program, we need to be involved. I can tell you volunteer programs don't work. The system isn't set up to encourage people to connect."

Chuck Stearns noted that while Lazy Bay is an area of concern it might make the most sense for the city to focus on areas closer to the city.

"I think you look around city limits," he said. "You look at those areas that are in the tax increment finance district and before the TIF goes away you set as a goal to have all the septic tanks in that area replaced. TIF can be used for both sewer infrastructure and environmental purposes."

In the City Beach and Viking Creek area there is city sewer service. The city plans to inspect those locations to rule out any problems in the city system.