

Study confirms septic pollution in Whitefish Lake

By TRISTAN SCOTT of the Missoulian | Posted: Friday, March 30, 2012 6:15 am

WHITEFISH – A nonprofit research organization this week released the results of a study that confirms septic pollution in Whitefish Lake due to outmoded or failing septic systems.

The report concludes that recreation is still safe on Whitefish Lake, but recommends that steps be taken to update aging systems and identifies areas along the shoreline where a high risk of future contamination exists.

The Whitefish Lake Institute conducted the study, which was sponsored by the Whitefish County Water District and funded by the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. The purpose of the investigation was to determine the extent of septic leachate from aging septic systems along the shoreline, and also to evaluate the ecological pressures, the economic threats to the Whitefish community and the potential public health risks posed by declining water quality.

Septic leachate is the liquid refuse that remains after wastewater drains through septic solids. It contains high concentrations of bacteria from human waste, detergents and other household materials.

“These findings are not outrageous, this isn’t spectacular or sensational, but it is definitely problematic,” Lori Curtis, science and education director at Whitefish Lake Institute, said. “Whenever you have human DNA in a body of water it is definitely not a good thing, and it’s really important for a community to come together and fix it.”

The costs of updating decades-old systems would be exorbitant, but Curtis said the need to do so is pressing. Previous studies identified septic leachate in Whitefish Lake as early as 1981 and the problem has only grown worse.

In addition to reporting the findings, the study made recommendations that include education and outreach programs geared toward property owners with outdated systems, as well as regulatory programs focused on making changes to protect the lake.

The report also identified potential state and federal funding sources that may be available for upgrade projects.

Curtis said city government has been responsive to the study and scheduled a work session in May to brainstorm solutions to the problem.

“We are thrilled that Whitefish City Council is appreciative and has expressed a willingness to fix the problem,” Curtis said. “Nobody wants to spend money fixing broken toilet systems, but it is an important fix, even though it will be expensive.”

The study identified three confirmed areas of contamination on City Beach Bay, Viking Creek and Lazy Bay. It also identified two areas with a high potential for contamination and four areas with medium potential.

Whitefish Mayor John Muhlfeld said he is committed to addressing the problem with an eye toward long- and short-term improvements, but a quick-and-easy solution is unlikely.

“We will certainly be working to try to find some solutions that are effective and feasible, but financially it is going to be a big hurdle, both for the city and private property owners,” he said.

Muhlfeld said one potential solution is for residents to take it upon themselves to update septic systems and drain fields to meet higher standards and for the community to band together and establish community treatment facilities.

According to local septic system engineers, the Point of Pines subdivision at the head of Whitefish Lake is an example of how an upgraded community wastewater system can benefit homeowners and the lake. A group of homeowners there formed a neighborhood association with the purpose of funding the system, which now serves 25 homes.

The purveyor of the new systems, Tom Anderson of Glacier Precast Concrete in Kalispell, said new septic technology is designed to dramatically diminish the levels of septic leachate by reducing nitrates and phosphates.

“The improvements are huge, especially compared to what was being installed in the ’70s and ’80s,” Anderson said. “Some of these systems are built out of car bodies and a couple of 55-gallon drums. That is not unheard of, but there is no way to make anyone fix it. The technology is there, but we can’t make them do it.”

Anderson said the Point of Pines subdivision serves as an excellent example of how a community can pull together to problem solve, but it is also a rare example. Installing a new septic system on a lakeside property often costs more to begin with – sometimes in the range of \$30,000 to \$40,000 – and the higher-level systems will add around \$10,000 to that cost.

Muhlfeld said the council will explore ways of offering incentives to property owners who are not annexed but are wholly surrounded by the city to connect to its services, but those property owners would still bear the costs of a new sewer system.

“We are just in the infant stages of really digesting the study,” Muhlfeld said. “The role of the institute is to provide the science to the community, and they have done that. Now it’s up to the city council to develop and address the issues of septic leachate.”