

Whitefish Pilot

SEPTIC POLLUTION A COMPLEX ISSUE WORTH SOLVING

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The community of Whitefish faces the challenging issue of septic leachate entering our shared resource, Whitefish Lake. In fact, it is an issue for communities on many lakes in Montana and throughout the United States.

Wherever homes have been built with on-site septic systems near water bodies, there is the potential for septic system failures over time leading to septic leachate pollution.

We would like to express our appreciation to the Lion Mountain homeowners. There have been a number of articles in various news outlets over the past several months discussing the septic leachate issue as it pertains to the Lion Mountain neighborhood. As background, it is important to note that septic leachate is an issue in several areas around Whitefish Lake — Lion Mountain was just the first to be addressed.

The problem is not new and is not caused by any implied disregard on the part of the homeowners in affected areas. Pre-1990s septic systems were not designed to last much longer than 20 years. Newer systems are designed to last longer, but none of them last forever. Basic home septic systems are typically made up of a tank, pipes and a drainfield — all of which have potential failure points. The location, geology and soil type where systems are installed also contribute to potential malfunctions. Now that the problems have been identified, homeowners on septic systems around the lake will have opportunities to take appropriate action.

Many Lion Mountain homeowners have expressed their concern as they have learned about septic leachate pollution and its potentially harmful effects on the water quality of Whitefish Lake. A core group of Lion Mountain homeowners is forming a Lion Mountain Wastewater Management Advisory Council, a group that will begin to investigate their options and potential solutions.

WLI is working to put together useful information to help Lion Mountain and all of the Whitefish community to better understand septic leachate as well as options for addressing water quality degradation that results from human development.

Recently, the Whitefish City Council passed a resolution that offers deferred annexation of up to 20 years for neighborhoods around the lake where septic leachate has been demonstrated. This action is clearly a progressive tool to aid in addressing the issue. At the Whitefish Lake Institute, we will continue to play a role in facilitating this complex issue and its many moving parts. It will take many years to address all of the areas with septic leachate contamination given the complexity of local, state and federal funding needed to assist in the process. But we can do it. Lake Tahoe and Lake Washington are classic examples of communities where tough decisions were made to clean up their lakes resulting in great community benefit.

Ultimately, we are all in this together and we will all have a role to play in protecting our precious water resources for the future.

— Mike Koopal and Lori Curtis are the Executive Director and Science & Education Director for the Whitefish Lake Institute