

TOWN & COUNTRY



Mike Koopal, Whitefish Lake Institute executive director, presents Colleen Sullivan with the institute's Chris Ruffatto Excellence in Education Award. (Heidi Desch/Whitefish Pilot)

Institute honors educator, water quality work

By HEIDI DESCH
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The Whitefish Lake Institute is honoring a longtime Whitefish educator and an organization that has supported water quality initiatives for many years.

WLI has awarded its 2016 Chris Ruffatto Excellence in Education Award to retired Whitefish High School teacher Colleen Sullivan. Its 2016 Stewardship Award goes to the Whitefish County Water and Sewer District.

Sullivan came to Whitefish in 1978 after teaching in Baker. She dedicated nearly 40 years to her career as a biology and physical education teacher and coach for all three Whitefish schools. She retired in 2016.

Mike Koopal, WLI executive director, said Sullivan was selected for the award for her commitment to her students, who often speak very highly of her.

"It's very clear to us she has had a significant role in shaping the next generation," he said. "Everybody knows she is an exceptional

“**She has had a significant role in shaping the next generation.**”

teacher and mentor. We are appreciative of her role in inspiring students to appreciate science and nature.”

Sullivan began her career in Whitefish as a physical education teacher. She coached track from 1978 to 1984, volleyball in 1978, 1979, then from 2003 through 2008, and again in 2015.

She began teaching biology in 1986 when classwork focused on plant and animal systems. Later the curriculum changed significantly

when students began learning on more of a molecular level.

Whitefish Superintendent Heather Davis Schmidt praised Sullivan's work in the classroom.

"Colleen is an innovative educator, a true role model in both her classroom and in coaching sports," Davis Schmidt said. "She is one of the key building blocks of our community who has helped create a strong foundation for our children in and out of the classroom."

The Whitefish County Water and Sewer District has supported water quality initiatives in Whitefish for more than 30 years.

Koopal said while the purpose of this small organization has so far not included traditional involvement in water and sewer infrastructure, it does contribute to numerous water quality protection and improvement efforts.

"The WCWSD's fiscal sponsorship role has helped forward numerous grants without which the Whitefish

community would have far less information about the health of their water," Koopal said. "We would have made far less progress toward improving water quality without the District's support."

The water and sewer district in 1984 sponsored a grant to support the University of Montana Flathead Lake Biological Station's limnology of Whitefish Lake study.

In 1986, the district sponsored a Department of Natural Resources and Conservation renewable resource grant and loan program grant that allowed for the investigation of septic contaminated groundwater seepage as a nutrient source to Whitefish Lake, which eventually led to the partial sewerage of the East Lakeshore.

The district sponsored grants for the 2003 Whitefish Lake water quality study and then sponsored a grant for the Whitefish Lake Institute's investigation of septic leachate to the

shoreline of Whitefish Lake released in 2012, and grants to conduct a preliminary engineering report for the Lion Mountain neighborhood in 2015 and 2016.

Most recently, the district once again sponsored a DNRC grant for a preliminary engineering report set to be completed in 2017 for the East Lakeshore neighborhood.

The district also supported the development of the Living Wetlands Interpretive Nature Trail off of Wisconsin Avenue and has made annual contributions to the WLI to support water quality monitoring on Whitefish Lake.

WLI is a nonprofit organization committed to science, education, and community stewardship to protect and improve Whitefish Lake and Whitefish area water resources today, while providing a collective vision for tomorrow. For more information, visit www.whitefish-lake.org.