

Whitefish moves to annex West Lakeshore properties

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Whitefish City Council has passed a resolution officially signaling its plan to annex 25 properties on West Lakeshore Drive into city limits.

Many of the properties have Whitefish Lake frontage and the city has said it's considering the move as part of efforts to protect the water quality of the lake.

Council June 6 approved the resolution which indicates its intent to consider annexation of the wholly surrounded land method of annexation, which under state law allows the city to annex property without the property owners having the right to protest or prevent the annexation

when access to the properties can only be gained by crossing through the city. The annexation is set for a July 18 public hearing and subsequent vote.

City Manager Chuck Stearns said there is heightened concern about septic leachate pollution in Dog Bay by the Whitefish State Park, so annexing the West Lakeshore area may help spur some new connections of septic systems to the municipal sewer system already in place in that West Lakeshore area.

"By annexing, then some people will voluntarily connect to city sewer," Stearns said. "Because the sewer line already extends through the area, if a septic fails

Flathead County would require them to connect."

A recent engineering study suggests that the nearby Lion Mountain neighborhood should connect to city sewer because the Dog Bay area near Whitefish Lake State Park is showing signs of septic leachate pollution.

Wastewater lines extend throughout the area. There are 11 properties already on the city system and with annexation their monthly sewer bills for the base rate would decrease by about 10 percent, and their rate for quantity of water used would decrease by about 27 percent.

West Lakeshore Drive is listed as the city's second priority for possible areas to bring into the

city limits. Two years ago the city set a priority list for possible areas for annexation. Houston Drive was listed as the first priority, but that was held up by preventive litigation. Flathead County District Court decided in the city's favor in the lawsuit.

Stearns has said because Houston Drive was caught up in litigation, city staff moved to working on the next priority on the list.

Other city services such as fire, police and ambulance would respond to the properties.

"Right now there is a patchwork quilt of what's inside and outside city limits," Stearns said. "That makes it difficult for dispatch in emergency

situations."

The city estimates the 25 properties would generate about \$48,000 in new property tax revenue and the assessments for streets, greenway, street lights and stormwater would bring in about \$5,700. The property owners would face the normal connection costs when choosing to connect to the city's sewer or water systems.

Property owners would typically see as a result of annexation about a 20 percent increase in their tax property bill,

with some exceptions for low value, vacant land, according to Stearns.

A county park on West Lakeshore was originally considered as one of the properties to be annexed. However, Flathead County Commissioners sent a letter to the city in May stating its objections to having the park change to city jurisdiction.

The letter pointed to a state law that specifically does not allow the annexation of county parks that are wholly surrounded by other property being or already annexed.