

Lake Institute calls for action

By **RICHARD HANNERS** Whitefish Pilot | Posted: Thursday, June 24, 2010 12:00 am

Now in its fifth year, the Whitefish Lake Institute has accumulated four years of baseline data on the lake and a list of concerns that its board of directors want addressed.

Those concerns run the gamut from petroleum contamination from the railroad and a service station to invasive species that could take over the lake and fireworks displays that could endanger human health.

In a recent presentation to the Whitefish City Council, institute director Mike Koopal described these concerns and provided recommendations that include continuing water quality studies and putting more pressure on government agencies.

Koopal also suggested establishing a "Round-up For Clean Water" program, where city utility bills would be rounded up to the nearest dollar to raise money for key projects, in a similar way to the Flathead Electric Cooperative's Round-up For Safety program.

Mackinaw Bay

The Institute wants contaminated soil cleaned up at Mackinaw Bay, the site of a 1989 Burlington Northern train derailment. Up to 25,000 gallons of diesel fuel spilled into Whitefish Lake, and after a lengthy clean-up, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) closed the file in the mid-1990s, Koopal said.

But contamination continues to exist at the site, Koopal said. An oily sheen appears on the water when people walk on the soil or when boring for samples. Koopal said he took David Romero, an on-scene coordinator for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), to the site last winter. Romero is overseeing BNSF Railway's clean-up of the Whitefish River.

Koopal said the same federal Oil Pollution Act authorizing the river clean-up could be invoked at Mackinaw Bay. He asked the council to draft a letter to both EPA and BNSF Railway asking for the train wreck site to be cleaned up. The city needs to "keep putting pressure on them," he said.

The council on June 21 unanimously approved a letter on the Mackinaw Bay cleanup drafted by mayor Mike Jenson. City manager Chuck Stearns said he showed the letter to the EPA and BNSF ahead of time and got an immediate response from BNSF.

On June 17, Stearns said, he traveled by boat to the train wreck site with local BNSF representative Doug Schuch and a consultant from Kennedy/Jenks, the environmental company which is working on the Whitefish River cleanup for the railroad.

The water level was much higher than it was when Koopal and Romero were there in April,

Stearns said, so to create a sheen, they had to go a short distance away from the shore and stir up the bottom.

Stearns also noted that when he last spoke with Romero, the EPA official said he wouldn't be working as much in Whitefish now that most EPA employees were tied up with the huge BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Gasoline leak

Koopal would also like the EPA to take over clean-up of the Whitefish River below the Town Pump service station. DEQ has known about the problem since 2003, Koopal said, but evidence of benzene leaking into the river in 2007 prompted the city council to write to DEQ urging more action.

In an Aug. 28, 2007, letter to mayor Andy Feury, DEQ director Richard Opper said his agency was "already addressing this pollution incident" with monitoring wells and clean-up plans. A leaking pipe union on a premium-gasoline dispenser was blamed for the contamination, but a steep bank between the service station and the river made installing an interceptor trench difficult, Opper wrote.

"Given the extremely low discharge of the seep, natural volatilization of the petroleum constituents, dilution by the river water and the fact that no one drinks river water, the seep was not considered a significant threat to the public health or the environment," Opper said.

Koopal sharply criticized the state agency's position in a June 4 letter to mayor Mike Jenson.

"Since (2007), the DEQ project manager in Kalispell has communicated to both EPA and the city of Whitefish attorney that there is no more active release of contaminants to the river based upon their mitigation," he said. "This is simply untrue."

Koopal said the Institute collected samples in February that showed benzene levels to be "as high as in 2007."

Fireworks

Pollution of Whitefish Lake by Fourth of July fireworks displays at City Beach could be a little easier to address. Perchlorates used as a solid rocket propellant easily dissolve after landing in lake water and can affect the function of thyroid glands, posing a threat to brain development in children, Koopal explained.

Koopal said the chemicals persist for several weeks, and he advised against allowing children to swim at City Beach during that time. The city and many lakeside residents use the lake as a source of drinking water, he noted.

Fireworks that don't use perchlorates are available but are more expensive. Koopal said he spoke to Whitefish Chamber of Commerce executive director Kevin Gartland about switching to different fireworks and recommended that the city take a position on their use.

Possibly one of the greatest threats to Whitefish Lake is posed by invasive non-native species, particularly zebra mussels, which could quickly coat the lake's bottom with razor-sharp shells in a matter of years.

Koopal noted that having only two boat-launching sites on Whitefish Lake will help in preventing non-native species from getting into the lakes, but it wouldn't be easy. Tiny immature zebra mussels, for example, can be sucked inside motorboat engines at out-of-state locations and survive until the boat reaches Whitefish Lake.

There's no way known to eradicate zebra mussels, he said. Other than erecting signs and educating the public, the Institute at this time has no recommendation for dealing with non-native invaders, Koopal said.

Fundraiser

The Whitefish Lake Institute will hold a wine auction fundraiser in July, beginning with a wine-tasting and auction preview under the tent at The Lodge At Whitefish Lake on Thursday, July 8, from 4-6:30 p.m.

A dinner, raffle and live and silent auctions will take place in the Lodge's ballroom the next day from 6-10 p.m. Tickets are \$100 for Institute members and \$150 for nonmembers. For more information, call 862-3632 or visit online at whitefishwineauction.org.