

Modifications suggested for city AIS prevention program

By DANIEL MCKAY
Whitefish Pilot

The Whitefish Lake Institute is looking to fine-tune its aquatic invasive species management program heading into the summer.

The institute presented a summary of its efforts last year and a fiscal year 2019 budget request to City Council last week during a work session at City Hall.

Changes to the program this year planned are a new beach ranger assistant program at Whitefish Lake State Park, modified hours, a new early hours self certification course, electronic reporting and a new location for the boat decontamination station.

Whitefish last spring began requiring AIS inspections of all boats entering Whitefish Lake at State Park and City Beach, as well as decontamination for all high risk watercraft as determined by boat inspectors. In addition to operating a boat inspection station at City Beach the city began operating a similar station at State Park.

WLI this year is planning for a total budget of \$170,450 for the program, with about \$122,000 of that requested to come from the city of Whitefish. City Council will still have to vote to authorize city funds for the AIS program. Last year it approved spending up to roughly \$140,000 on the plan.

Modification of the hours of operation are planned for the inspection station at City Beach, but hours will remain the same at State Park. This year the inspection station at City Beach will open at 6 a.m. instead of 5 a.m. From May to June, the station will be open from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., and from June to August it will remain open until 10 p.m. In September it will again close at 9 p.m.

Opening later helps reduce staff costs and keeps staff from being alone at the station in the dark, early morning hours, WLI Executive Director Mike Koopal said.

Koopal said about 15 to 20 people routinely came in for the 5 a.m. opening.

"I think the cost savings for the city kind of outweighs that convenience to the public. And to offset that inconvenience, we're going to offer an early angler self-certification program," he said.

Lori Curtis, Science & Education Director for WLI, said the program will help those anglers get out on the water bright and early, but in a safe and educated way.

"Part of that early angler program, like the other self-certification programs, is just education. Just explaining to them what the concerns are and getting those folks to understand that they are potential factors. We think that if they're good people, they're going to not want to be [factors]," she said.

The decontamination station this year will also find a new home at the Don K overflow lot on the west side of Highway 93 South. The Glacier Nordic Club's ski shop will also be moved to the lot to house staff and materials from May to the end of September. Previously the station was located at Whitefish Marine and Powersports on the east side of the highway.

Another new development for the program is electronic reporting.

Gone are the days of paper forms filled out and filed by staff, Koopal said. The electronic reporting, done on tablets, will allow more information to be used faster.

"The great thing about it is once that boat comes into Whitefish, we can query the boat hull number, and we can tell where that boat's been, what's been done to that boat, if it's been decontaminated," he said. "It's real time information to assist the inspectors to assess whether this is a high-risk watercraft."

In addition to regular staffing, the city Parks and Recreation department will also add a beach ranger assistant for six weeks in June and July to assist with AIS

inspections, according to Carla Belski, Community Services Direction for parks and recreation. She said FREEFLOW students at Whitefish High School are being recruited for that position.

The Whitefish Lake Institute developed the expanded aquatic invasive species plan last year to prevent the spread of zebra mussels to the lake and surrounding waterbodies. It recommended the city adopt the plan after waterbodies east of the Continental Divide previously tested positive or had suspect results for zebra mussels. The city first began supporting AIS management in 2013.

Last year's plan, rebranded as "Our Lake Our Future," included increasing watercraft inspection hours at City Beach, gating the boat launch and funding a city-run inspection station at Whitefish Lake State Park.

The lake saw 6,450 total boat visits passing through city inspection stations at City Beach and Whitefish Lake State Park. More than 500 boaters took self-certification courses as well.

Speaking to Council, Koopal thanked everyone who had a hand in making the expanded management program a success in its first year.

"I want to thank all of you guys because last year, when we put this more comprehensive inspection program together, it entailed a lot of coordination and effort," Koopal said. "I think everybody was surprised that it went as smoothly as it did. That's credit to you guys for seeing our vision and doing this."

Mayor John Mulhfeld said he's heard plenty of

praise for WLI's efforts to keep AIS out of Whitefish Lake.

Muhlfeld said he was presenting on Whitefish's program at an American Fishery Society conference in Helena and received plenty of comments and congratulations from other community leaders looking to follow the city's lead.

"You're really setting an example in the state in terms of how to collaborate and make it a local effort as well," he said. "I applaud and thank you very much for all your efforts."

One of the most observable successes of the larger AIS management program, has been the work toward eradication of Eurasian water-milfoil in Beaver Lake west of town.

"You think back four or five years ago, we took out 25 pounds of this stuff [out of the lake.] So we're down to two plants, so

this has proven to be a very successful program and one of very real success stories when it comes to eradicating AIS once you have it."

Councilor Frank Sweeney asked if that success is expected to continue.

"Do you have a sense that we're going to be

able to eradicate it?" he asked.

"Based on the linear decline, I don't see why not," Koopal replied.

A total of \$9,850 for early detection and monitoring is proposed for this year's budget, with \$3,350 of that dedicated to Beaver Lake.

Whitefish Pilot

Wednesday, March 28, 2018