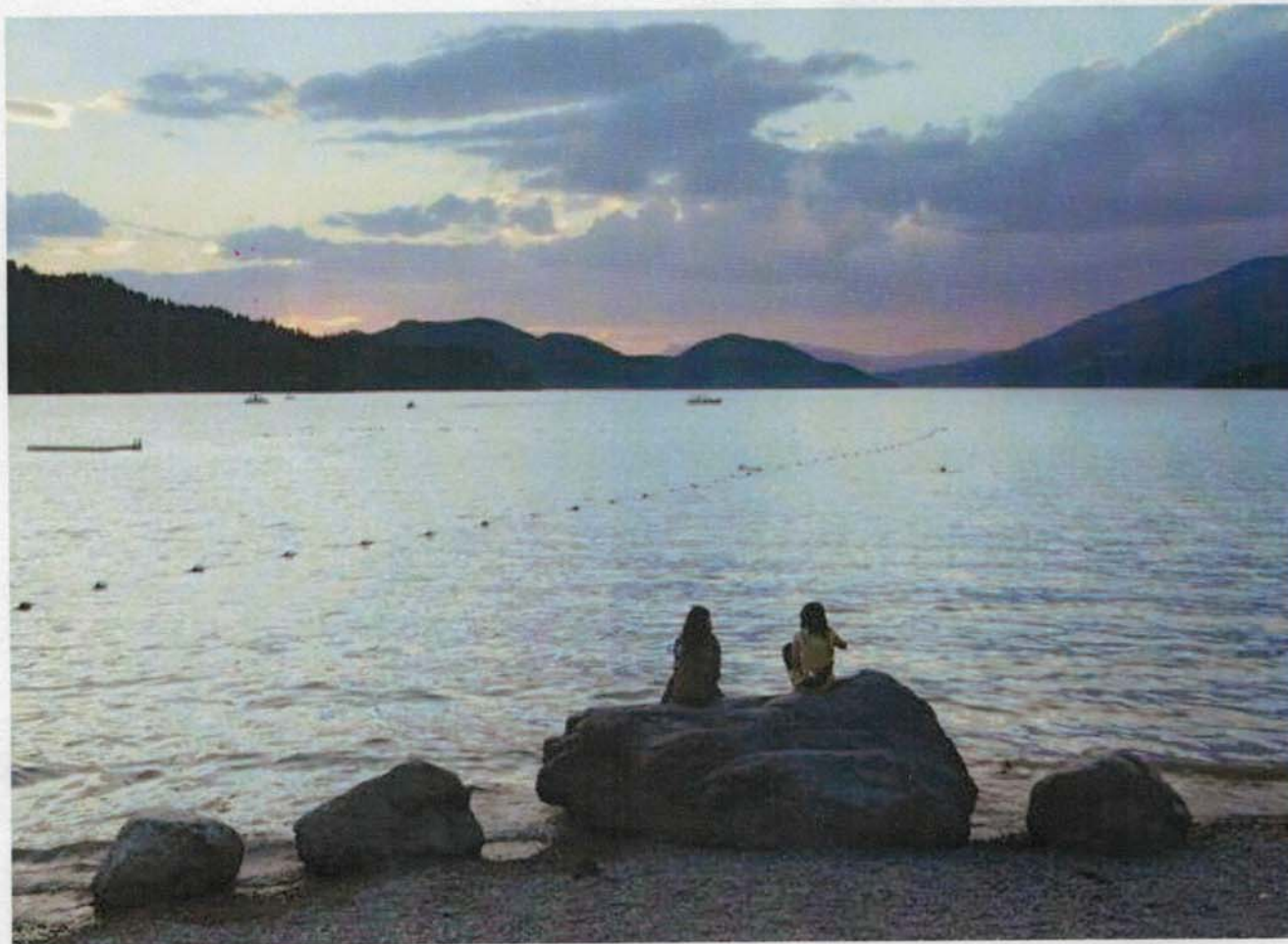


# SEPTIC CONTAMINATION ISSUES FOR LAKE REMAIN UNSOLVED

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Whitefish Lake

Failing septic systems around Whitefish Lake have been long known to be causing septic contamination in the lake.

Since the first study roughly four decades ago by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency when septic contamination was first reported, to the most current data released by the Whitefish Lake Institute in 2012, the studies have indicated a growing concern for human health and water quality on the lake.

Septic leachate is the liquid waste that remains after the wastewater drains through septic solids. It contains elevated concentrations of bacteria from human waste, detergents and other household materials that is transported by groundwater through sediments into the lake.

"Septic tanks are very effective when properly installed, replaced and maintained," says Mike Koopal, executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute. "The problem with the lake is that it has narrow lots that are steep to the lake. Whitefish Lake is just not a good place for septic tanks."



Functioning septic systems are designed to collect waste and neutralize contamination before it enters ground or surface water systems. There are an estimated roughly 600 septic tanks within a quarter mile of the lake and about half those have the potential to impact the lake, according to the institute.

While the institute continues to say that the lake is safe, it also says the issue still needs to be addressed as a "public health issue" and action is needed to prevent the lake from sliding beyond what's described as a "tipping point in its ability to withstand further degradation."

"This is such an important issue because of water quality, but also because the lake drives our economy and our lifestyle," Koopal said. "We are going to keep moving on this in the future."

The 2012 institute study identified three confirmed areas of contamination on City Beach Bay, Viking Creek and Lazy Bay. It also identified two areas with a high potential for contamination and four areas with medium potential. The ad-hoc Whitefish Community Wastewater Management Committee was subsequently formed by City Council following the release of the study to make recommendations for the next steps.

As a result the committee produced a management plan that recommended the city conduct preliminary engineering reports for five neighborhoods around the lake after being identified as having medium to high risk of septic leachate contamination. The first two — for the Lion Mountain and East Lakeshore neighborhoods — were subsequently completed both confirming contamination entering the lake as a result of failing septics and recommendations that homeowners connect to city sewer.

After a half dozen years by WLI staff spent on the topic of failing septics and septic leachate — educating folks, looking at the issue more in-depth with preliminary engineering reports in select areas around the lake, all the while looking to galvanize a few neighborhoods to seek solutions likely though connecting to city services, the institute says the issue has at times felt like "moving a large lead ball uphill."

WLI has identified some grant sources from the state that could help continue education and outreach efforts, and others that could result in funding for neighborhoods to connect to city services. It's also working with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation on the potential of a Legislative study bill during the interim that could focus on the issue of water quality and septic leachate on a broader scale. Koopal said a study at the state level could "provide tools and answers to keep this moving forward."

"We're hoping to engage Flathead legislators and the Flathead Basin Commission," he said. "This is not just about Whitefish Lake, this is an issue for Flathead Lake and other lakes in the state."

The institute sees its steps forward as a two-prong approach, Koopal says, of targeting support from the state and local level.

"We're looking at what we can do to help keep this alive," he said. "We're looking at what we can do at the state and local level to push this forward."

Democratic state Rep. Dave Fern said he supports a study bill that would prompt an interim legislative committee to look in-depth at the issue and could potentially result in legislation or funding related to septic leachate. He noted that he already hopes to bring Flathead Valley legislators together to work together on the issue, as well as others that can have an impact not just to Whitefish, but more regionally.



"It seems logical that we need to better define the problem and that's both regional and statewide," he said. "There are a few issues that are important to the issues — economics, transportation and water. Hopefully the Flathead delegation can lead the way, much like it did with [aquatic invasive species.]"

Fern said quantifying the problem first through study may provide more tools for solutions. It could also provide broader support that could result in the passage of a bill that, for example, could lead to regulations requiring septic inspections, he noted.

"On Flathead Lake and Whitefish Lake we have older septic systems that are an issue," he said. "As Montanans we value our water, wildlands and recreational opportunities that come from our waterways and through this maybe we can find appropriate solutions."

**At the local** level, Koopal said the institute would like to keep the community engaged and educated about the issue. He recognizes that it is an issue that is often hard to grasp because when septic systems are failing around the lake it doesn't mean contamination is backing up into an individual home, but rather that contamination is making its way to the lake.

"The systems have been failing for a long time even though there is no outwards signs that people can see," he said. "We don't want this to slip by the wayside. We as a community need to make decisions that insure the lake is clean."

Mayor John Muhlfeld said the city remains committed to finding and supporting solutions to the septic leachate issue as a longterm non-point source of pollution.

"Septic leachate is a nationwide issue," he said. "Whitefish is not alone in this battle and I thank the Whitefish Lake Institute for having the dedication and resolve to inform and engage our community on this complex topic. I think it is clear that we need support from the state to address this issue and I strongly advocate for a legislative study bill to further explore this topic and inform local government."

Beyond study, Muhlfeld notes that as a nonprofit the institute can't directly apply to many funding sources, but the city can sponsor those grant applications and work directly with the institute.

"The city supports any tools that can further our efforts to address this issue including grants to assist neighborhood groups in their mitigation efforts," he said. "I have been discussing with our City Manager the potential for our current long-range planner to collaborate with WLI on this issue and liaise with city departments."

During the city's wastewater management committee work, the Lion Mountain neighborhood was ranked as high risk because it has a high density of aging septic systems. Research from Whitefish Lake Institute shows chronic signs of pollution in Dog Bay near Whitefish Lake State Park where groundwater from Lion Mountain seeps into the lake. The majority of homes on Lion Mountain are using septic systems, with half of those over 25 years old, and a third over 35 years old.

A report by Carver Engineering in 2016 recommended homeowners on Lion Mountain should abandon their septic systems and hook up to city sewer to prevent harmful pollution from entering the lake and their drinking water.



With the goal of protecting the water quality of the lake, City Council in July 2016 passed a resolution allowing for deferred annexation when a neighborhood connects to the city's sewer system by creating a rural special improvement district. The city agreed to delay annexation for up to 20 years if property owners petition Flathead County to create a rural improvement district to fund connection of the neighborhood.

The policy was prompted by discussions with the Lion Mountain neighborhood. That resolution allowing for delaying annexation is set to expire this summer.

Muhlfeld said the city is very motivated in assisting neighborhoods in mitigating the effects of septic leachate. He expects Council to discuss the need to extend the deferred annexation policy and even expand it from 20 years to 30 years to match the length of RSIDs.

A questionnaire sent out to Lion Mountain homeowners during work on the preliminary engineering report regarding septic leachate only garnered a 36 percent response rate. Of those who did respond, about half said they would prefer to stick with the status quo and do nothing to address the issue. WLI and city staff subsequently spent months meeting with homeowners in the Lion Mountain area, but the goal of getting the neighborhood to connect to the city sewer never got traction. Concerns raised from homeowners included the cost to connect and eventual annexation into the city.

Lori Curtis, WLI Science and Education Director, said one of the reasons Lion Mountain was selected for study first was it seemed the best likelihood to connect to services.

"The idea was that we could set an example with Lion Mountain, but when we got a 'no' there it was hard to feel like we could go forward elsewhere," she said.

Last year a second preliminary engineering report for a large swath of properties along East Lakeshore Drive said homeowners there too should also connect to city sewer to keep pollution out of the lake. Aging septic systems in the area at homes primarily along the lake from Monks Bay to Les Mason State Park should be abandoned in favor of hooking into the city system, according to the report issued by Carver Engineering. Though not on the lakeshore, properties in Alpine Village were also recommended for connection.

The interest in the report from homeowners hasn't been high. A questionnaire sent out to the roughly 100 homeowners regarding the septic leachate only garnered a 23 percent response rate. Of those that responded, the preference was to do nothing as a group, but let each property owner replace their septic system if and when it fails.

Koopal said more outreach to the East Lakeshore Drive neighborhood could be done to engage the homeowners and the institute remains open to look at new avenues for eliminating failing septics in any neighborhood around the lake.

"We are open to suggestions," he said. "We'd love to identify new tools to put in the toolbox."

Muhlfeld said the city has a desire to continue working on the issue.

"We recognize that this issue affects the lake's ecology, public health, property values, and our tax base," he said. "A healthy lake equals a healthy community."