



Group works on plan to deal with septic pollution in lake

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By HEIDI DESCH Whitefish Pilot

The City of Whitefish's wastewater committee is reaching out for public input while it continues to draft a management plan for how to deal with septic pollution in Whitefish Lake.

The committee held a forum last week and released a survey that asks participants about their concern for septic leaching and what type of system they have in their own homes.

"I think our progress has been good," committee chair Andy Feury said. "Our goal is to make the lake healthy. The personal agendas have been set aside and we want to put the lake in the forefront."

The Whitefish Lake Institute released a study last year that confirmed septic contamination in the lake that is likely the result of failing septic tanks at homes along the lake. While the lake is considered safe, the institute has recommended the city move toward a management plan that could clean up problem areas.

The Institute study found contamination at City Beach bay, at Viking Creek and Lazy Bay. It also designated a few areas as being at-risk for future contamination.

The city council in July created the committee charged with making recommendations regarding the issue. The committee is on target to deliver its proposed management plan to council in July. From there the council will decide what action may occur.

Feury said the challenge in drafting a management plan is to create one that is acceptable to the city and community, while not being overly onerous so it can be implemented.

The preliminary management plan includes a short-term neighborhood level program to mitigate known septic leachate issues, and a long-term approach that may include policy development or inspection programs.

Lori Curtis, with the Whitefish Lake Institute, serves as a facilitator for the committee.

She describes the committee's recommendations as three main categories: how to manage and take care of aging septic tanks along the lake, what the response will be if a septic system fails and the homeowner is unable to make the repairs, and what kind of regulations will be imposed for the future.

"There are short- and long-term goals," she said. "The city will have to review the recommendation and look at what is feasible and financially possible. Part of their reaction will be to determine in what areas they can make a difference."

The draft management plan sets short-term options for neighborhood areas with medium to high-risk assessments. The management for those specific areas would start with applying for grants to conduct a preliminary engineering report to further define the problem area and determine mitigation options, along with funding for those options.

Areas identified as those that would benefit from an engineering report are Lazy Bay, Lion Mountain, Point of Pines and East Lakeshore Drive from Gaines Point to Big Mountain Road turn-off. The areas would need to be specifically defined as part of the engineering report.

At City Beach bay and Viking Creek it is suggested the public works department rule out a breach in the city system and follow up with further testing to investigate these two areas.

It's likely a long road ahead to get funding in place and begin work to replace failing septic systems.

"It may take years to make these problems all go away," Curtis said.

The committee's funding potential timeline has the first grant applications beginning with this year, preliminary engineering reports taking place in 2015 and infrastructure work beginning in 2017.

Curtis said getting the funding in place through grants would be necessary.

"The funding will take some of the burden off of the individual, the city and the county," she said. "Getting that funding makes the cost to the community far less."

The committee is exploring a number of grant funding opportunities. One of the sources is the Water, Wastewater and Solid Waste Action Coordinating Team or W2ASACT. The group is made up of state, federal and non-profit organizations that finance or provide technical assistance for community water and wastewater systems.

"It's a really neat way for the city to take care of these issues," she said. "With the grants we would have the opportunity to get something in place to fix these problems with less cost."

Under the long-term portion of the plan, the committee is considering solutions to protect human and lake health for the future by establishing basic regulations and programs. This section includes a septic system maintenance program, property conveyance inspection program and regulatory policy.

Under the maintenance program, septic system owners would be required to perform maintenance tasks which could include inspection of the system at intervals or completing a use questionnaire to determine maintenance and inspection frequency.

The property inspection program would require inspection at the time of sale or transfer of the property and require pumping, repairing or upgrading as necessary.

There is some jurisdictional coordination that will have to take place as well. Curtis said in some instances it might make sense for the city, county or water district to take the lead on addressing a problem.

The wastewater committee's survey is available on the main page of the city's website at <http://www.whitefish.govoffice.com/>. The survey needs to be returned to city hall by April 25.