

# OPINION

## Protecting the lake for the long-term

The public is invited to a community forum to learn more about Whitefish wastewater management challenges and plans, meet with members of the Whitefish Community Wastewater Committee, and provide the committee with your comments. The forum will be held in an "open house" format on March 25. The public is welcome to drop in any time from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., or from 5-7 p.m. at Whitefish City Hall.

Septic "leachate" is the liquid that remains after wastewater drains through septic solids. The liquid contains elevated concentrations of bacteria and organic compounds from waste, detergents, and other household materials. These compounds threaten human health; the economic health of our community; and the ecological health of the lake and downstream waterways of

### □ Committee seeks input during forum March 25

the Flathead Watershed.

When properly functioning, septic systems are designed to neutralize these contaminants before they enter ground or surface water. However, septic systems that are improperly installed or maintained, or that have outlived their finite life expectancy fail to remove these contaminants.

In 2011, a study was conducted to investigate septic leachate contamination in Whitefish Lake and to identify:

- Public health risks from pathogenic viruses and bacteria.
- Ecological threats to the lake such as eutrophication due to the increased loading of nutrients.

• Economic threats to community such as unsafe or unappealing water for recreation due to decreased water quality.

Study results showed that septic leachate compounds are present in Whitefish Lake.

Whitefish faces many challenges typical of a lake-based urban community, most notably declining water quality. Whitefish Lake is a major source of drinking water for the city and a heavily used recreational area, which includes two Montana State Parks and the popular City Beach. It is the heart of the Whitefish economy, one that is driven mostly by recreation and tourism.

Located in the headwaters of the Columbia River Basin, Whitefish Lake affects not only the people, economics, and fish and wildlife of Whitefish Lake, but also influences Flathead Lake. Protecting and enhancing the waterways in and around

Whitefish is important for economic, social and environmental sustainability.

The issue is not new and it is not a Whitefish-only problem. It is shared by many lakeside communities across the U.S. that have septic systems close to water bodies. The good news is that there are a number of actions that can be taken to prevent further water quality degradation. These actions will take time, money, community support and dedicated resources.

The Whitefish Community Wastewater Committee is working to develop a long-term program to identify options and funding mechanisms that lead to long-term solutions, and we want your input!

— John Muhlfeld, Mayor of Whitefish, and Pam Holmquist, Flathead County Commissioner

## State legislators deal with implications of Affordable Care Act

The legislators are learning an entirely new language this session which is the result of the Affordable Care Act coming from the Feds. President Obama's platform on who should be in the pool, who shouldn't and what it will look like when delivered to the citizens is starting to grow legs.

HB250, sponsored by Liz Bangerter, was heard in Business, Labor and Economic Affairs. It is an attempt to detail who can certify and train the people who will be recommending one plan over another to the citizens.

Enrollment will begin next Jan. 1 for plans sold on the exchange. Of course, if you qualify for a subsidy to the health plan there will be a safety net. Nobody knows the limits on income yet, but trained people will lead you through the massive paperwork.

Households with four people and an income of \$92,000 may qualify for a free or low-cost program under current rules. With average household income hovering around \$68,000 for a Montana family of four, we can see that the majority of us will be in the free or reduced line. How many of us would consider \$92,000 a poverty income?

Only those companies with less than 50 employees will go to the exchange. Larger companies will be proving their plan and having it scrutinized by the federal government.

Grants will be available for all this training needed to implement Obamacare, not yet determined. Taxpayer money will be used for the grants and will be applied for by various groups, though there are no grants currently available.

Are you confused yet? I hope I'm not the only one scratching my head and asking questions. It gets even better. Now the health care reform will have "counselors," "assisters" and "navigators" to get us on the path of insurance correctness. Long gone is the time where we could depend on our local agent to have a grasp on what's best for us or our employers to offer a decent package. Now the federal government is going to insert itself into our lives and make it more 'affordable' to have insurance for the masses.

HB250 was heard about four weeks ago in a House committee. The bill already needs an amendment during the Senate hearing because the Feds have decided yet another part of the puzzle which has to be in Montana law. I imagine the number of amendments to this piece of legislation will only grow as rulemaking is decided in D.C.

This bill provides training requirements for the counselors and in-person assisters, along with navigator training. By the time this bill has all its moving parts nailed down, someone said there will probably be a "page turner" involved in training, too.

As for me, with words like "assisters" and "navigators" I feel I'm in a bad sequel to Avatar. The federal insurance plans are swooping in. Buckle up. It's going to be an interesting ride.

— Sen. Dee Brown

### In My View Dee Brown



City pulls plug on motorized mannequin

## Aging agency needs new building now

The "Red Barn" on Kelly Road is no longer adequate for Flathead County Area Agency on Aging.

This building has housed offices, congregate meals, Meals on Wheels, and volunteers on a temporary basis for over 10 years. The facts are before us. The multi-purpose of the AOA has grown. The population of seniors has grown. The current facility is very crowded and unsafe. The county commissioners and their staff have studied the problems and know changes are

needed.

The staff, volunteers, and seniors who are using the current building have waited for years for a safer and more spacious facility that would have a future for them. Having space without bumping into each other and having space that is safe from hazards are critical and necessary improvements.

Seniors have faithfully paid their taxes for many years. Through the years, their participation in our community has enriched the history of the

area. Flathead seniors are alive and well, still contributing to the economy and life of this area. I believe the AOA staff, volunteers and the local aging population deserve respect and support in realizing a new facility.

This community will welcome the county commissioners and Kalispell City Council's decision to move forward on building or buying a spacious and safe building as soon as possible. Let's not delay another year!

— JoLynn Yenne lives in Bigfork

## Legislation needed to provide necessary health-care services

I began practicing medicine more than 40 years ago because I had the desire to make a difference in people's lives by not only providing needed medical care but also by helping them maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Unfortunately, many Montanans struggle with the ability to afford things like food, heat and clothing and certainly preventive medical care and early intervention in illness.

Fortunately, we now have the opportunity to give 69,000 of our less fortunate neighbors who currently don't qualify for Medicaid the ability to receive quality health care in a consistent and timely fashion through

Medicaid expansion.

In my primary care medical practice here in Whitefish, I saw a large number of low-income patients who sought help for conditions which could have been prevented with programs including regular cancer screenings, immunizations and healthy lifestyle choices.

While working in the emergency room I often treated patients who hoped their health problems would "just go away," but eventually came into the ER in need of extensive intervention. Many also used the more costly hospital emergency room instead of primary care offices because

they didn't have insurance and couldn't show proof of their ability to pay as required by most private clinics. The higher cost of emergency room care and treating more severe health conditions, with the inability to pay for their care, shifts the financial burden of this care to those who have insurance or pay cash.

Shepherd's Hand Clinic offers free health-care services once a week in Whitefish and I am honored to volunteer my services. Organizations like this and the Flathead Community Health Center in Kalispell help fill a void for those on limited incomes, but they cannot meet all of the needs

of our communities.

We've been given an opportunity to provide more necessary medical care and preventive healthcare services by taking advantage of the federal money offered to our state. If we don't enact legislation to expand health insurance coverage to low-income Montanans, we will be giving our federal income tax dollars to all the states around us to use in improving access to care for their residents, while continuing to see our own residents struggle. Please encourage your local legislator to support this legislation.

— Dr. Ronald Miller

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