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## Whitefish gears up for more annexation

West Lakeshore Drive next on city's agenda

By LYNNETTE HINTZE  
Daily Inter Lake

Citing heightened concern about pollution in Whitefish Lake, the city of Whitefish is considering the annexation of 26 properties on West Lakeshore Drive.

The Whitefish City Council on Monday will discuss the rationale and schedule for annexations that could take effect by late July.

The council held a work session two years ago to discuss potential annexations, including both the west- and east-shore areas of Whitefish Lake.

In March a Whitefish Lake Institute report recommended Lion Mountain homeowners should hook up to city sewer because the Dog Bay area near Whitefish Lake State Park is showing chronic signs of pollution.

That report acknowledged

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## WHITEFISH

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homeowners would pay a hefty price to connect to city sewer — collectively about \$2.9 million — plus annual operating and maintenance costs of close to \$87,000.

“Annexing the West Lakeshore area may help spur some new connections of septic systems to the municipal sewer system already in place,” City Manager Chuck Stearns said in his council report. “At least it would take away annexation as a disincentive to connecting onto the municipal sewer system.”

The city proposes to use the “wholly surround” method of annexation in its quest to take in property that only recently became part of Flathead County’s Rural Whitefish Zoning District resulting from the legal battle over the Whitefish “doughnut” area around the city.

Under state law, the wholly surround method allows cities to annex certain properties without the property owners having the right to protest and prevent the annexation.

“Given that all of these properties proposed for annexation can only gain access to their property by crossing through the municipality on a portion of West Lakeshore Drive, which is already in city limits and by State Park Road, these properties are wholly surrounded,” Stearns said.

The timeline for annexation includes a neighborhood meeting at City Hall with affected property owners on May 26 and a public hearing on July 20.

A report on the extension of services required by the proposed west-shore annexations points out the city of Whitefish would resume planning jurisdiction of that area. The city had planning control prior to the Montana Supreme Court’s ruling that ceded jurisdiction to the county in 2014.

“It is likely that the zoning would be restored to the zoning these properties had when they were in our extra-territorial jurisdiction,” Stearns said.

The return to city control means building permits and associated impact fees would once again be required for new development.

Affected west-shore property owners would

see a roughly 20 percent increase in their property taxes, with some exceptions for vacant land.

The city estimates the 26 properties would generate new city property taxes of about \$48,350 a year, plus another \$5,700 annually from street, greenway, street light and storm-water assessments.

Property owners would face the normal connection costs when they choose or need to connect to city water or sewer. Connection fees for an average home include \$2,000 to \$2,500 for water impact fee, \$1,600 to \$2,000 for sewer impact fee, \$500 to \$550 for water meter and \$200 for a water tap fee. Larger houses are assessed higher impact fees, Stearns said. These costs do not include the cost of running the service pipe from the main to the house, he added.

The validity and applicability of Whitefish’s extension-of-services plan was upheld by the Montana Supreme Court in 2004, following a legal battle with property owners over a round of annexations that began in 1998.

The City Council meets at 7:10 p.m. Monday at the interim City Hall,

1005 Baker Ave. in Whitefish.

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