

WHITEFISH

Fireworks restrictions, parking program approved

By **CHAD SOKOL**
Daily Inter Lake

WHITEFISH — The Whitefish City Council has enacted a new fireworks ordinance that aims to limit fire hazards, noise disturbances and the spread of harmful chemical compounds in Whitefish Lake and the city's drinking water.

The council approved the new regulations on Monday with two amendments to the original proposal, which was modeled after Bozeman's fireworks ordinance. The new Whitefish ordinance:

Bans the sale of fireworks within city limits.
Prohibits the dis-



THOUSANDS GATHER at City Beach for the Fourth of July fireworks show over Whitefish Lake. (Heidi Desch/Whitefish Pilot FILE)

charge of all types of fireworks in parks, within 1,000 feet of hospitals, nursing homes and

assisted living facilities, and within 300 feet of gas stations and flammable storage facilities.

Allows certain "consumer" fireworks to be discharged on paved city streets, not including arterials and collector streets, between 11 a.m. and 10 p.m. on July 3, and between 11 a.m. and 11:59 p.m. on July 4.

Requires anyone who discharges fireworks to clean up the resulting debris.

Raises the fine for first-time violations of the ordinance to \$500.

Allows the city manager and the city fire marshal to review permits for public fireworks displays, require detailed applications for those permits 15 days in

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advance and require operators of public displays to have insurance and clean up debris.

Allows the city to impose conditions on public displays, including banning "concussive" fireworks and publishing public notice.

Requires operators of public displays to begin phasing out fireworks containing large amounts of perchlorates — a type of highly water-soluble compound known to pose health threats to people and wildlife.

The council first enacted a fireworks ordinance in 2002 and amended it in 2009, but fireworks have continued to draw various complaints. City Attorney Angie Jacobs noted Monday the sound from "concussive" fireworks can travel far across Whitefish Lake, and the noise can disturb

pets as well as people with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Jacobs also noted that few, if any, fireworks have been sold within city limits, so the new prohibition on sales should have little immediate effect.

CITY STAFF also cited a 10-page "white paper" submitted by the Whitefish Lake Institute in 2019 that spells out the dangers of perchlorates, which are used in the manufacturing of propellants for rockets and missiles, as well as fireworks, airbags and blasting agents.

The institute cited scientific research revealing negative health effects of perchlorates in wildlife, including hermaphroditism in fish and inhibited larval development in amphibians. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns perchlorates can cause thyroid damage in humans, posing heightened risk

to infants, children, pregnant women and their fetuses, people with preexisting thyroid deficiencies and those with iodine-deficient diets.

Whitefish sources some of the city's drinking water not far from the barge where fireworks are shot upward every Fourth of July; many homeowners along the shoreline also source water directly from the lake. While levels of perchlorates had not been directly measured in Whitefish Lake, the institute cited research from other bodies of water showing the compounds can spread quickly and linger several months after fireworks displays.

The new ordinance will require operators of public fireworks displays to replace an increasing share of their fireworks with ones that contain little or no perchlorates. By 2025, at least half of the fireworks used in public displays in Whitefish will have to use alternative

formulations, including nitrogen-rich compounds, alkali metals and alkaline earth metal salts that are more eco-friendly.

But council members acknowledged those alternatives are not only more expensive than traditional fireworks but also harder to find. The council unanimously approved an amendment that would allow operators of public displays, such as the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce, to use more traditional fireworks if they demonstrate that efforts to find eco-friendly alternatives were unsuccessful.

The council also unanimously approved an amendment clarifying that fireworks may not be discharged within city limits on July 5, which is in line with the previous ordinance.

THE COUNCIL also approved a pilot program that will offer \$20-a-month parking permits to owners and employees of

downtown businesses in July and August. The program will eliminate the need for workers to move their cars throughout the day, as many parking spaces downtown are limited to two or three hours.

Instead, those with permits will be allowed to park all day in the lot at Third Street and Central Avenue, the lot at East First Street and Spokane Avenue, the lot directly south of the Whitefish Community Library, or on the third floor of the parking garage at East First Street and Baker Avenue.

That also could free up downtown street parking and help ease traffic congestion.

Details of the program were recommended by an eight-member committee of city staff, school district staff and business representatives. The council authorized the city to test out the program by issuing a maximum of 85 permits this

summer.

"It's a pilot program, so we're hoping to get data from this to see if the designated areas will work," council member Rebecca Norton said. "And also, we would like a lot of input from the people that will use the pilot program, on the cost of it as well as if it's a hardship or not."

Norton said roughly 540 people work downtown.

"We really want to give them more surety about where they can leave their cars and not have to worry about leaving their work premises over and over, and also open up space for visitors," she said. "It's a start, but we do need feedback. So I'm really glad that we're doing it, especially since we're anticipating a busy summer."

Reporter Chad Sokol can be reached at 758-4439 or csokol@dailyinterlake.com