

Group to study lake

By PAUL PETERS

Whitefish Pilot | Posted: Thursday, May 12, 2005 12:00 am

Getting ahead of the rapid growth happening in the Flathead Valley and Whitefish has been more than just an idea lately.

This year, the county has formed a long-range planning commission, and Whitefish started its own planning department with the goal of planning ahead of growth, is going through a downtown master plan process, and getting involved with the future of U.S. Highway 93.

Add to this list the non-profit Whitefish Lake Institute. The goal of this newly formed body is to provide information on Whitefish Lake, and smaller surrounding bodies of water, so that Whitefish can understand the effects of growth, and plan for the future.

Whitefish is unique in that it is the largest Montana community that sits so close to a large lake, Mark Holston, director of the Flathead Basin Commission, said, and it is growing so quickly.

New homes and lodges are springing up all around the lake.

"People need to learn that how they develop their property can have a lot to do with water quality," Holston said.

The information they will need to know their place in the life of the lake is partly what the institute aims to provide.

"We want to provide actionable recommendations to the community of Whitefish that will facilitate on-the-ground solutions," said Mike Koopal, executive director of the institute.

This information could also be useful for potential city projects, said Frank Morrison Jr., a member of the institute's board of directors.

One of these potential projects had come up in recent master plan meetings - the possibility of Whitefish River coming into town via a canal along Burlington Northern Santa Fe tracks.

In order to do a project like that, it is likely that some way of controlling water levels in the river and lake would need to be devised. And to do that, Morrison said, they will need information about how that will affect fisheries, silting and homeowners around the lake.

Whether or not the river is extended into the city, the information could be used to check the feasibility of regulating river and lake levels to make them more navigable.

Several organizations have worked to provide lake information in the past, including the Flathead Basin Commission, the Whitefish Water and Sewer District, The Swift Creek Coalition and Fish,

Wildlife and Parks.

The institute plans on bringing information together these groups have provided over the years and supplementing it with their own. They will not be a management body, but will instead provide their findings to other bodies, such as FWP, and to homeowners and developers.

At this point, the institute is preparing to bring together all past research, as well as provide some of their own. Once this status report is finished, the institute will have an idea of where they can be most useful.

The institute is also beginning to raise funds through memberships, donations and grants to fund the institute.

Things have gotten off to a good start, Koopal said.

"I can't believe the amount of support we've already received from community members and businesses just from word of mouth," he said. "I think there are a lot of visionaries in Whitefish who recognize the importance of protecting and improving our lake resources."

Koopal was unabashedly proud of his colleagues at the institute.

"The depth of experience and expertise that we have on our board of directors and committees is amazing," he said. "I'm excited about the direction and vision that they will provide to the institute."

Koopal himself has spent the last 15 years working on fisheries and environmental issues in Montana, Idaho, Nevada and Alaska. He spent the last six years as a partner at Watershed Consulting, LLC, of Whitefish.

"I've been fortunate to study many different aquatic ecosystems with diverse issues, but I've decided it's time to concentrate on one resource that I have a passion for, and where I think there is a definite call to action," he said.

Koopal will write "Lake Line," a monthly column for the Pilot, exploring local lake issues and providing education on water resources.

To become a member of the institute, or for more information, call Mike Koopal at 862-4327 or visit the institute on the Web at www.whitefishlake.org