

Whitefish Pilot

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Conservation efforts focus of field trip during conference

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Whitefish Pilot

Whitefish's watershed conservation strategies were on full display during a recent gathering of water experts from around the state.

The Montana Watershed Coordination Council's 2018 Symposium brought more than 150 participants here to discuss communication strategies, compelling storytelling, fundraising and more earlier this month at the Lodge at Whitefish Lake.

Mike Koopal, Whitefish Lake Institute Executive

Director, on Oct. 11 took symposium participants around Whitefish to visit some of the city's key watershed and conservation sites.

Koopal brought a few dozen participants to the Living Wetlands Interpretive Nature Trail of Wisconsin Avenue, the city of Whitefish's water treatment plant, the Whitefish School District's Center for Sustainability and Entrepreneurship and a stream bank restoration site on Haskill Creek.

See Efforts, A3

Efforts

from A1

Community partnership was Koopal's primary theme at the wetlands, which came about through a collaboration between the developer and Whitefish Lake Institute. The 28.82-acre wetland area was gifted to WLI in 2009 by the Averill family as part of the Viking Creek Development proposal.

Years of fundraising built the Living Wetlands Interpretive Nature Trail, which opened to the public in 2013. The trail offers a short hike through the area, and also serves as an outdoor classroom for Whitefish students during field trips.

It's also a hotbed for wildlife activity, Koopal said, and footage from trail cameras backs that up.

"It's incredible, the biodiversity we have in the wetlands. Basically the only animal that we don't have is a grizzly bear, although we know they frequent this area. We've got tons of pictures of black bears, mountain lions, coyotes, turkeys, fox — you name it," he said.

In talking about how the Averill family built the adjacent Viking Creek neighborhood to recoup the money that could be made from developing the wetland, Koopal also noted how those neighborhood residents pay into WLI to preserve the area as part of their homeowner dues.

In this case, both the homeowners, the developer and Whitefish residents benefit from the partnership.

"Those homeowners definitely had a benefit of having their house next to a nature preserve that's never going to be developed," he said. "It's a little give back from those folks."

Following the wetlands tour, Koopal brought symposium participants to see where Whitefish's water gets ready for the tap.



Landowner Kent Reimer chats with participants from the Montana Watershed Coordination Council's 2018 Symposium. (Daniel McKay/Whitefish Pilot)

ment plant serves roughly 7,000 residents through 3,500 connections, with source water coming primarily from Second and Third Creeks in Haskill Basin.

The water obtained from those creeks counts for about 90 percent of the city's total annual volume. Remaining water comes from Whitefish Lake during base stream flows and higher consumptive rates in the summer.

The Haskill Basin Watershed Council and WLI partner with the city working to maintain protection of the water sources in Viking and Haskill creeks.

Concerned with development in the Haskill Basin watershed, the city, along with the Trust for Public Land, worked to secure the Haskill Basin conservation easement, which protects 3,000 acres of forestland north of Whitefish. The easement completed in 2016 resulted in removal of the development rights for the land owned by F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Co. while protecting the city's municipal water supply, allowing for continued sustainable management of the timber and guaranteed recreation access.

Adjacent to Whitefish High School, participants seemed particularly interested in a tour of the Whitefish Schools Center for Sustainability and Entrepreneurship.

Over the last few years, the sustainability center has evolved from plans for a simple green-

learning center that includes outdoor learning areas. The building is also designed to be net-zero in its energy use, the first in the state of Montana, according to the school district.

Whitefish High School science teacher Eric Sawtelle recalled how the idea for what was initially planned to be a much smaller greenhouse came up after his students attended a youth food systems conference in Missoula.

"Our students left feeling really energized, really empowered. They wanted to do something here locally that enabled them to study food, create food for their community, and build community partnerships, so we just started fundraising," he said.

Since then, the center added private fundraising to enable its final, \$2.3 million form. Now the priority is to see how the center works in practice.

Sawtelle shared with participants some of the soil study experiments currently taking place in the center.

One participant was amazed at the research and coursework planned for students.

"This is high school?" she asked, drawing a laugh. "School has

changed a lot."

Koopal echoed that sentiment.

"I think we can all agree that this isn't the high school we grew up in. It's pretty cool, and I want to applaud [Sawtelle] for what you've accomplished," he said.

The final stop on the tour demonstrated a real example of community partnership that directly helps residents.

The group bussed out to Haskill Creek at Kent Reimer's property, where the banks of the creek used to suffer from erosion issues.

From 2011 to 2014 the Haskill Basin Watershed Council and the Flathead Conservation District partnered on a stream restoration project on Haskill Creek on Reimer's property.

The partnership worked to reduce bank-related erosion and sedimentation along a 1,222-foot stretch of the creek. Bank-stabilization techniques were implemented at five sites along the creek.

Students from WHS

volunteered on the project and provided project monitoring, and River Design Group contributed to the project's design, construction and effectiveness monitoring.

The bank-stabilization was successful, with erosion and sedimentation decreasing at all five sites and native vegetation returning to the buffer zone.

Reimer said without the help, he wouldn't have known where to begin.

"What we saw was overwhelming. We had no idea how to manage it or how to get the job done," he said. "All of a sudden there were people who could help us with that project."