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Matt Baldwin / Whitefish Pilot

Groundwater flows into Dog Bay at Whitefish Lake. Studies have determined septic leachate from development along the lake is contaminating the lake water. The Dog Bay area has been identified as an area of high risk.

Cost of clean water

Report: Lion Mountain homes should connect to city services

By **MATT BALDWIN**
Whitefish Pilot

A new report says Lion Mountain homeowners should abandon their septic systems and hook up to city sewer if they want to keep harmful pollution out of their drinking water and Whitefish Lake.

Following through with that recommendation, however, will come with a hefty price tag and not everyone is on board with the idea.

Aging septic systems on Lion Mountain and other neighborhoods around Whitefish Lake have been con-

firmed as sources of groundwater contamination impacting the lake. Research from Whitefish Lake Institute shows chronic signs of pollution in Dog Bay near Whitefish Lake State Park where groundwater from Lion Mountain seeps into the lake. The majority of homes on Lion Mountain are using septic systems, with half of those over 25 years old, and a third over 35 years old.

While the lake is considered safe, WLI says action is needed now to prevent the lake from sliding beyond what they describe as the "tipping point."

WLI partnered with Carver Engineering of Kalispell last year to investigate and propose remedies for the septic leachate issues. A community forum was held last week at City Hall to discuss their findings.

While contamination in the lake remains an issue, engineers found another troubling water quality concern.

Elevated levels of nitrate have been detected in Lion Mountain's drinking water, likely the result of wastewater

See Water, A3

seeping into underground fractures.

"Nitrates in groundwater can come primarily from human sources — nitrogen is in human waste," explained Tom Cowan, engineer with Carver Engineering. "If you get increased nitrates ... that's a concerning situation. If you did nothing you may end up abandoning that water supply."

The nitrate levels in Lion Mountain's drinking water spiked in 2013 at 3.5 mg/l, according to Carver's report.

"That's kind of disturbing," Cowan said.

A level of 5 mg/l sets off more stringent testing, while 10 mg/l would be cause to abandon the water source.

Carver's report recommends extending the Whitefish city wastewater system to serve all homes on Lion Mountain as the preferred alternative to address the septic leachate issues.

Capital costs to connect the neighborhood to city service is estimated to be \$2.9 million with an annual operating and maintenance costs of \$86,877. That pencils out to user costs of about \$138 a month if some grant funding is obtained, up to \$173 a month without grants.

"We knew it was going to be big numbers, and they are," said Andy Hyde, engineer at Carver Engineering. "Grant opportunities would lessen that sting a little, but it's still big numbers."

Additional annual costs would come in the form of city taxes if the neighborhood is annexed into Whitefish — about a 20 percent tax bump.

City Manager Chuck Stearns says City Council could consider tax rebates as incentives to hook up to city services, or other options to lessen the financial blow. Delaying annexation also is a possibility, but Stearns warned that setting such a precedent is a major concern.

Whitefish Lake Institute is carrying the torch in the effort to find outside funding for the project through federal grants.

Science and Education

The community has to show some forward thinking and desire to do these projects.

Director Lori Curtis notes that having the preliminary report ready allows them to seek available grants. The report is good for two years.

"There is still a large pot of money available in the way of grants and loan programs," Curtis said. "In order to apply and be in the running, we have to have some first steps, one of those is this report."

Another hurdle, at least 50 percent of affected homeowners need to show support for connecting to city services in order to be eligible for funding. Curtis says currently the neighborhood is nowhere near reaching that level of support.

A questionnaire sent out to Lion Mountain homeowners regarding the septic leachate only garnered a 36 percent response rate. Of those who did respond, about half said they would prefer to stick with the status quo and do nothing to address the issue.

Lion Mountain resident and state legislator Rep. Ed Lieser says there are a vast number of part-time residents in the Lion Mountain area, which is problematic for gaining participation in such a project.

"I'm in a quandary about how we move ahead as a community," said Lieser, who is a proponent of hooking up to city services. "Gaining concurrence and participation is complicated and difficult at best. How do we move forward in the effort to come to some kind of conclusion?"

Lieser said the Lion Mountain Homeowners Association board hasn't made a concerted effort to engage the neighborhood in a discussion.

"The complacency is going to have to be addressed," Lieser said, adding that an ongoing

education campaign is a likely next step in getting the neighborhood talking about the issue.

"The information is out there, but only if you make the effort," he said. "I'm afraid we may have to force feed residents with numerous and repeated reminders."

Curtis notes that no state or federal entity is requiring homeowners to take any action at this time. That could only change if the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency determines the septic leachate to be a public health concern.

Joe Russell, Flathead County health officer, says the county takes failing septic systems very seriously.

"We will [force you to] replace your septic if it fails — you can bet on that," he said.

He said there is no dispute about the contamination in the lake.

"You see human-caused pollution in this area," he said. "If you have a documented problem, it's up to all of us [to fix it.]"

Curtis said that while she understands the upfront financial pains of connecting to city services, it will be more expensive in the long-run to stick with the status quo.

"As septic systems break down, people will be required to replace them with costly systems," she said.

A new septic system is estimated to cost more than \$30,000.

Ultimately, Curtis said it's up to Lion Mountain residents to be proactive.

"The community itself has to show some forward thinking and desire to do these projects," Curtis said.

"Do you want to be on the front end of the problem or the back end? The front end is much less costly."