

Lake Whatcom Management Program a Win for the Community

By Mayor Kelli Linville, County Executive Jack Louws and Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District General Manager Patrick Sorenson

We are happy to report to the community that through collaboration, hard work and a commitment to improving our primary drinking water reservoir, the Lake Whatcom Management Program (LWMP) is showing success in protecting this valuable community asset.

This program, established in 1998 by an Interlocal Agreement between the City of Bellingham, Whatcom County and the Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District (LWWSD), is founded on our long-standing commitment to protect, preserve and enhance the water quality of Lake Whatcom. Last year we worked with our Councils and Commission to reaffirm our efforts and establish milestones for removing phosphorus and bacteria from stormwater entering Lake Whatcom.

Since then, we have clarified the work, costs, and funding necessary to restore lake water quality to a near-natural condition. Our collaborative efforts are reflected in the 2015-2019 Work Plan. We are pleased to report that we remain on task and on schedule toward achieving a clean and protected source of drinking water and a healthy habitat for wildlife and people.

Last year we said that this program would set a new bar for cooperation between City, County and LWWSD on the protection of our drinking water supply. Last month, we stood before our Councils and Commissions with an aggressive yet pragmatic plan for the next five years of work and a shared funding package that will get the work done. That plan was adopted unanimously by all three bodies.

Programs showing progress

The actions contained in our five-year plan show that the LWMP can and will deliver on the community vision of a clean and protected water supply for future generations. The City, County and LWWSD are directing more local funding to the LWMP than ever before and have made a long-term commitment to meet Washington Department of Ecology requirements to determine the actions needed to return the lake to acceptable water quality standards. Any outside funding will accelerate our work to meet our objectives -- and we will aggressively pursue all funding options.

The Lake Whatcom Management Program is now more than 12 percent of the way toward reaching Ecology's phosphorus reduction target of 3,000 pounds. Under Ecology's requirements, the target must be reanalyzed using updated water quality and streamflow data. That work is already underway and will inform the program's response to the findings.

We are committed to continuing programs that are successful in protecting our lake, including the City's extension of right-of-way improvements along North Shore Drive, County right-of-way improvements along Lake Whatcom Boulevard, completion of the County's second phase at Coronado and Fremont Streets in Geneva, and our joint project to treat the steep hillside above the lake near Academy Road.

We have committed to an expanded program to refit high-density residential areas in the City and County. Beyond the developed areas that we are mandated to address, 63 percent of the watershed

area is protected from future development via public ownership and Commercial Forestry Zones that cannot be developed. A phosphorus neutral plan for county park lands is just getting underway, led by the County Parks Director.

The City and County are also conducting market research to inform how to most effectively engage residential property owners in productive dialog about stormwater and phosphorus reduction. The joint work is aimed at identifying the best combination of information, incentives and technical support to achieve the biggest residential phosphorus reductions. Constituents will be receiving the first invitations to participate during the coming weeks. In the past two years, 120 residential properties have been retrofitted under the Homeowner Incentive Program.

Working cooperatively to protect our future

None of this is successful without the participating staff and community members maintaining the highest level of teamwork and productivity. This plan presented to our Councils and Commission in April, when held against the backdrop of committed, ongoing capital work, is the preview of what success will look like in the Lake Whatcom watershed – visionary collaboration, financial cooperation, and plain hard work.

The City, the County and the LWWSD will continue to meet annually to discuss program accomplishments and goals for moving forward. We are committed to being strong advocates and partners for protection and improvement of lake water quality -- for the 100,000 current residents of Bellingham and Whatcom County who get their drinking water from Lake Whatcom and for future generations to come.