

A concrete problem

By LOUISE WREGG - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, October 4, 2015 6:00 am

Keeping Lake Michigan clean starts with how you wash your vehicle.

"It's not about not letting people wash their cars," said Marcy Colclough, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. "... We're trying to educate residents and business owners about what they can do to protect our water resources."

When people wash their cars on a concrete driveway, she said, all the soapy and contaminated water runs into the storm water system. That water is not treated and usually runs straight into a natural waterway.

In the case of Benton Harbor, she said much of its storm water ends up in Ox Creek, which runs into the Paw Paw River and then into the St. Joseph River before ending up in Lake Michigan.

She said the polluted runoff can be minimized by washing your car on the grass or gravel so the contaminated water soaks into the ground and is filtered naturally before it reaches a creek or stream. Or, she said people can wash their vehicles at car washes, which are required by law to collect the polluted runoff and pretreat it before it goes into the sanitary sewer system, where it is treated, again, before being dumped into a natural waterway.

"Water is definitely a limited resource," she said. "The earth isn't creating any more of it. If we pollute what we have, the cost to clean it up is very expensive."

Plus, she said many Southwest Michigan communities get their drinking water from Lake Michigan.

She said it may not seem like a big deal for the soapy, oily water from one car to run into the storm water system untreated. But multiply that by all the cars in the area, and it becomes a big problem.

"Everybody needs to do their part," she said. "If everybody does it, it ends up being a lot of pollution, depending on what the chemical is. It may not take very much, like oil. A drop of oil can contaminate a lot of drinking water."

She said another way residents can help keep the waterways clean is by picking up their dog's poop and throwing it into the trash can.

"There's a problem with E. coli getting into Lake Michigan, and it can come from animal waste," she said. "... Everybody is like, 'Well, it's just my dog.' But if everybody is letting their dog's waste get in, it's a problem. It all adds up."

She said Southwest Michigan is fortunate to border a large body of fresh water. She said many tourists

visit to participate in water activities, which have a huge economic impact. Plus, she said, most residents say they love the area because of its fresh, clean water.

"Who wants to move to an area where you can't swim in the water," she said.

Ox Creek, which flows through Benton Township and Benton Harbor, has been getting a lot of attention for the past few years because it is highly polluted and is on the list of water bodies in Michigan that need to be cleaned up, she said.

"It's one of the most urbanized sub-watersheds we have," she said. "A lot of runoff is being generated."

She said that Benton Township used to be mostly farms and fields. The Orchards Mall is where an orchard used to stand. Now, she said much of what used to be ground is impervious surfaces that can't soak up water and filter it.

"The traditional way of dealing with storm water is put it in a pipe and get it off the property as quickly as possible," she said. "We've learned that that doesn't do very well. It not only carries pollutants into our waterways but causes downstream flooding in some cases."

Now, she said the goal is to slow down the water so as much water as possible soaks into the ground.

She said that thanks to a recent grant, she will work with Benton Township businesses to retrofit them with green infrastructure to do just that.

The Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy (SMLC) this summer received a three-year, \$600,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality to clean up and protect the Paw Paw River watershed, which includes Ox Creek.

Colclough said the matching portion of the grant is \$400,000.

She said Wightman & Associates in Benton Township has agreed to do a demonstration project as part of the grant.

"They're going to take out some of their parking lot and put in a rain garden and soils to handle runoff that comes off of that area and ends up in Ox Creek," she said.

A big part of the grant will enable the conservancy to conserve 700 acres of land along the Paw Paw River, including 300 acres of critical wetlands, said Geoffrey Cripe, director of the SMLC.

He agreed that preserving the area's waterways starts with simple actions, like how you wash your car.

"Too often, people don't realize the impact one minor action can have on the entire waterway," he said.

"What makes our state so special is the waters. It's a quality-of-life issue."

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