

BH trying to put teeth in water pollution rules

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

BENTON HARBOR - How to clean up Ox Creek is a topic Benton Harbor city commissioners have been grappling with for the past few months.

Commissioners have been discussing the "Illicit Discharge and Connection Ordinance," which is required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency so the city can keep its storm water permit under the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System.

City Manager Darwin Watson said the City Commission passed the ordinance in 2005. However, because it was never published in the newspaper, it isn't in effect.

Some commissioners fear that the ordinance makes washing a car in the driveway a crime, but Watson said that isn't the case. He said the ordinance is geared to fine businesses that are dumping polluted water into the storm water system.

"Right now, there is no methodology to remedying a problem if we find someone with an illicit discharge," he said.

The problem is that water in the storm water system isn't treated before it enters a natural waterway and ends up in Lake Michigan, he said.

If the ordinance is passed, offenders can be fined between \$500 and \$1,000 per day for the first offense and between \$1,000 and \$2,500 per day for repeat offenses.

The ordinance includes a list of authorized discharges, which includes water from non-commercial car washing as long as it doesn't violate Michigan's water quality standards.

To minimize pollutants getting into the storm water system, experts say vehicles should be washed on the grass or gravel so the dirty water can soak into the ground before finding its way to a natural waterway. Or, they say vehicles can be washed at car washes, which are required to collect the polluted water and pretreat it before it goes into the sanitary sewer system, where it is treated, again, before going into a natural waterway.

Contact: lwrege@TheHP.com, 932-0361, Twitter: @HPWrege