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'Keep It Blue'

Event hopes to educate residents on keeping water clean

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer 4 hrs ago



Lake Michigan fishermen try their luck off the north pier in St. Joseph last week. The first “Keep It Blue” event on Saturday in Bluff Park will educate residents on the ways they can protect the water supply.

Don Campbell / HP staff

ST. JOSEPH — When most of us think of water pollution, we picture big industrial operations dumping waste into rivers and lakes.

But according to the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, more than 60 percent of water pollution now comes from residential sources, such as cars leaking oil, failing septic systems and fertilizers from lawns, gardens and farms.

That's why the organization will be holding its first "Keep It Blue" event from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday at Lake Bluff Park in St. Joseph, to educate residents on what they can do at home to reduce water pollution. The booth will be located near the bluff stairs and the St. Joseph farmers market.

"We need water to survive," said Kris Martin, with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. "Only a fraction of a percentage of the world's water is drinkable."

That makes it important to keep the available water clean, he said. And Michigan can play an important role, as the state is adjacent to 20 percent of the world's fresh surface water, he added.

The "Keep It Blue" event is being held in partnership with the City of St. Joseph Public Works Department, Sarett Nature Center and PhycoTech Inc., an environmental consulting company. It is part of International Water Week.

Tom MacDonald, director of the public works department, will be on hand to talk about the storm water system and home lead water line testing.

Sarett will bring animals that are native to Michigan to the bluff, and native plants will be given away. Splash, the Silver Beach Center's mascot, is expected to make an appearance, and Dairy Queen will provide ice cream.

The event will offer tips on many of the simple things that people can do to preserve and improve water quality, from picking up pet waste to making sure that septic systems are serviced regularly, Martin said.

When potential pollutants are left unchecked, they can wash into drains that lead to storm sewers, that eventually empty into waterways.

Martin will present a watershed model that demonstrates where water run-off goes, and how it can lead to beach closings and other unwanted consequences. There also will be a water table display for the kids.

There will be displays on creating a rain garden that is irrigated by directing rain water to plants, as well as composting and setting up a rain barrel that catches precipitation that can be used to water lawns and gardens.

Communities such as New Buffalo, Three Oaks and New Troy have created rain gardens that direct water run-off to grow native plants.

Information on the “Clean.Dry.Drain” campaign will inform boaters on how they can clean their vessels to avoid the spread of invasive species.

Martin said that surveys show a deep well of interest in keeping water clean and available, and the goal of “Keep It Blue” is to inform residents on what they can do to make that happen.

Information is at www.swmpc.org/keepitblue.asp.

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Improve your water IQ

Things you can do to protect water quality:

- Never dump anything down storm drains.
- Take unwanted chemicals and paint to a hazardous waste collection site.
- Use fertilizer sparingly and sweep up driveways, sidewalks and roads.
- Check for and fix car oil leaks, and recycle motor oil.
- Take your car to a car wash instead of washing it in the driveway.
- Pick up after your pet and throw waste into the garbage.
- Have septic tanks pumped and inspected regularly.
- Compost yard waste.