

Little streams, big trouble

By LOUISE WREGE - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, April 24, 2016 6:00 am

Weko Beach along Lake Michigan in Bridgman is a gem frequented by locals and tourists alike.

It, along with several other Southwest Michigan beaches, are known for sandy beaches and crystal clean water.

But on the south side of Weko Beach is a small stream called Tanner Creek. This creek is one of several small tributaries that drain directly into Lake Michigan that are not part of larger watershed management plans, said Marcy Hamilton, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission in Benton Harbor. If the water in any of these creeks is polluted, the beaches near them are affected, she said.

“It’s all connected,” she said Friday while walking along Tanner Creek. “Water is life. That’s what we depend on.”

She said closing the beaches in the summer due to high E. coli counts is not only gross, but costs the area tourism dollars.

Last fall, she said, her agency received a \$472,185 state grant to study several streams from Stevensville to the Indiana line to create the Lake Michigan Tributaries Watershed Management Plan.

“The reason we went after this is because the (Berrien County) Health Department, when they were doing some beach testing a couple of years ago, was getting quite a few high E. coli counts along the beaches in the southern part of the county,” she said.

The health department reported there were between five and 12 beach closures due to high E. coli levels each summer between 2012 and 2015.

“Some work has been done with the health department and the conservation fund to fix the problem,” Hamilton said. “They’ve found some problem areas and got some things fixed, but there’s no real overall plan for this area. We need to figure out what’s going on.”

E. coli patrol



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Marcy Hamilton, senior planner for the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, walks along Tanner Creek on Friday as it flows into Lake Michigan on the southern edge of Weko Beach in Bridgman. The agency is using a state grant to study small streams.

She said E. coli is a bacteria indicator of waste, which can come from manure, wildlife, farm animals, or failing septic or sanitary sewer systems.

This summer, she said, water samples from each little stream will be sent to a lab in Lansing, where specially trained dogs will sniff them to see if human waste is present.

“The dogs will sniff, and if they smell human sewage, they’ll alert,” she said.

She said human waste means the stream is probably being polluted by a failing septic system or a crack in sanitary sewer line.

“For those samples that come back positive, we’ll go back and investigate where it’s coming from,” she said. “... We don’t want human sewage in our water. That’s the goal.”

If there’s a high E. coli count but no human waste is detected, then she said they will look for other sources of the pollution.

“If there is a hot spot, and they can’t figure out where it’s coming from, they may bring the dogs in to try to track it down,” she said.

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