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TOP STORY

Website promotes cleaner water, better beaches

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer Jul 5, 2019 Updated Jul 5, 2019

BENTON HARBOR — A family packs up and heads to the beach on Lake Michigan for a long-planned vacation. When they get there they learn that the water has been closed to swimmers because of contamination by E.coli, which can cause illness if swallowed.

This is an aggravation and an inconvenience for the family, but it is also a symptom of the larger issue of water quality in the rivers and streams that flow into Lake Michigan, the source of our drinking water.

The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, based in Benton Harbor, has posted a new website, BetterBeachesSWMI.org, that outlines the goal of improving water quality from Stevensville to the Indiana state line.

“We authored a watershed management plan that details solutions to reduce pollution. Ultimately, we want to eliminate beach closings due to E. coli bacteria levels being too high,” explained Marcy Hamilton, Senior Planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. “With the recent beach closings at Warren Dunes, Weko Beach, and Cherry Beach due to E. coli, the release of this website is very timely. We really hope the website will serve as a resource that will help to improve our Lake Michigan beaches and our economy.”

After conducting research, Hamilton and other partners concluded that failing sewer and septic systems are the source of the contamination that is flowing into the lake. E.coli is found in human waste, and not animal waste, she said.

Some of the storm water and waste water pipes underground are 50 to 100 years old, Hamilton pointed out. Broken septic systems can leak waste into the ground, that finds its way to waterways that eventually reach Lake Michigan. Cracked sewer lines also can cause contamination. This was the case with a sewer pipe along Red Arrow Highway in Chikaming Township, that last month leaked sewage into a storm water line that emptied into the lake. Nearby Cherry Beach was closed for several days.

“If water can into a pipe, water can get out of a pipe,” Hamilton said.

Roads aren't the only thing that need to be fixed in Michigan. The state needs to invest more than \$2.14 billion to fix and update its stormwater and wastewater management infrastructure, according to estimates by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Property owners don't always do a good job of checking if their septic systems are in working order. Hamilton said that if you can't remember the last time the system was inspected, it's time to get that done. Systems should be checked every three to five years, she added.

Berrien County health officials have lobbied for a statewide law that requires septic system inspections when a property is sold, but this has been opposed by realtors and no actions has been taken.

“Personally, I wish this was important enough as a county that we would do it locally, and not wait on the state,” Hamilton said.

County sanitarians only check water quality once a week, on Mondays, and recheck if contamination is detected. Hamilton thinks there could be many more incidents of E.coli contamination than are discovered. Swallowing water tainted with E.coli can cause vomiting and diarrhea, and more severe illness in some cases.

The website reports that Michigan is the only state without a statewide sanitary septic code, even though more than 1.3 million Michigan households and businesses use septic systems, a higher rate than the national average.

In Michigan, one in three households use septic systems, compared to one in five of U.S. households, and the number of systems in the state is growing, with half of new homes on septic tanks.

State officials estimate that 10 percent of those 130,000 systems have failed and are polluting the environment; however, the problem may be far worse. Several counties that require septic tank inspections during real estate transactions have reported a septic system failure rate of 20-25 percent.

A Michigan State University study found that septic systems were the primary contributor to elevated levels of fecal bacteria in 64 Michigan watersheds.

It's a big job keeping an eye on water quality, just in this region, Hamilton pointed out. In Berrien County there are 14 small streams, totaling 159, that flow into Lake Michigan from Stevensville south. Those streams are becoming more popular with kayakers and canoers.

There also are four inland lakes covering 171 acres, and almost 21,000 acres of drainage.

When it comes to water, for most people it's "out of sight, out of mind," Hamilton said. But water quality affects everything from health to the local economy.

The website offers advice on what residents, businesses and property owners can do to keep the water clean. For homeowners, one action is reducing the amount of water used, that eventually goes down the drain. The average home uses up to 70 gallons per day, per person. Installing high-efficiency toilets and showerheads is one way to reduce water usage. Being careful about what you put down the toilet and drains is another way to protect the system.

Ultimately, it's all "one water," Hamilton said.

It's going to take time and money to fix the problem and eliminate E.coli from our water sources, she emphasized.

"It took 50 to 90 years to get here, and not going be cleaned up in two to five years," Hamilton said. "In the meantime, there are so many small things we can do."

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