

OUR VIEW

City must do more to protect Lake Whatcom water quality

Anyone who cares about Lake Whatcom or clean drinking water has to be discouraged by the findings in the 2010 Lake Whatcom Monitoring Program.

The annual report compiled by scientists at Western Washington University has documented significant problems in the lake for more than two decades. Thirteen years ago, in 1998, the lake was listed as an "impaired waterbody" under the Clean Water Act because of a lack of oxygen.

Scientists say the lack of oxygen is caused by algae growth fed by large quantities of phosphorus streaming into the lake. The phosphorus comes from the soils and hill-sides, but also from grass fertilizers and animal waste. The continued development of homes in the watershed surrounding the lake exacerbates the problem.

Unfortunately, it seems, no matter how many years the studies show the problem getting worse, our community — as represented by our elected leaders — has failed in efforts to turn the tide.

Just two years ago, in the summer of 2009, the city of Bellingham had to restrict water use because there was so much algae in the lake. The algae was clogging the filters on the city water pipe and making it hard for water to get through.

Does that sound like a problem being solved? It doesn't to our editorial board. And, like many in the community, we are frustrated by how long it is taking to fix this issue.

In reporter John Stark's story on the 2010 monitoring data, the city's environmental resources manager said the current Lake Whatcom Management Plan — a combined effort of the city, Whatcom County, and the Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District — will gradually reduce phosphorus-laden runoff from existing developments around the lake. The plan goes through 2014.

To say we are skeptical would be putting it mildly. While local governments have taken steps when it comes to the potential for new homes around the lake — buying properties, placing strict limitations on the size of developments and such — those efforts don't address what the county's assistant public works director called the "elephant in the room" — stopping or treating the runoff from existing neighborhoods.

In response to that "elephant" our governments have commissioned many studies and signed off on many plans. But the plans have focused too much on "education" of citizens and not nearly enough on good old-fashioned public works projects, in our opinion.

We don't want to downplay the importance of teaching citizens why they shouldn't use lawn fertilizer when their home is uphill from the water pipe from which many of us get our drinking water.

But more important would be actually catching all of the stormwater coming off yards and streets in the city and either directing it away from the lake or treating it so thoroughly that the problems are removed.

It appears money is the main reason more has not been done. It's about setting priorities. Every year the city of Bellingham seems to have money to build more bike lanes and run recreation programs and dozens of other things ultimately less important than stopping pollution of the city's drinking-water source.

And costs are relative: The county spent \$210,000 to install a stormwater system at Lahti Drive and Britton Road in 2010. But the cost of improving the city's water treatment system to help offset increasing algae is estimated in the tens of millions.

We urge citizens to push their elected leaders even harder on this issue. Protecting and purifying Lake Whatcom should be a top priority in Whatcom County.

