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Star-News

Going back to sewage in Payette Lake must be a non-starter

Cougar Island, and other endowment lands around Payette Lake, put the governor in a conflicted position - a choice between protecting the lake and making money - or maybe both, if he chooses.

In 1925, the Idaho legislature sought to protect Payette Lake by enacting "Preservation of certain lakes as Health Resorts and Recreation Places," found in Idaho code, title 67, chapter 43.

It directed the governor to hold in trust the waters of Payette Lake for the people, to preserve the lake in its "present condition" at the time of enactment.

The intent was broad and clear, not just about the volume of water, but that, "for scenic beauty, health and recreation purposes necessary and desirable for all the inhabitants of the state is hereby declared to be a beneficial use of such water".

The governor also, of course, is an endowment lands trustee as set out in our constitution, so must seek the maximum long-term return to the endowment beneficiaries.

But, the state's plan for Cougar Island's sale and development assumes new septic systems within the 500-foot buffer it recognizes for the City's source water - our drinking water.

How is that remotely consistent with preserving the lake for health purposes? We spent millions to get rid of septic systems around the lake in the 1980s because there was real contamination of our drinking water. The elaborate system which replaced septic tanks takes the sewage out of the lake's watershed for safe treatment and disposal.

Going back to sewage in our lake must be a non-starter. Gov. Little can do better than that. If the governor cannot find a way to balance these two state policies of preservation of certain lakes and maximum return to the endowment, then the alternative will be to seek judicial interpretation of the conflict which could produce unexpected results and costs to the state. This is the time for the governor's office to provide leadership on these important and conflicting policies.

Cougar Island is just the first of many intended state land sales in our watershed. Our city and county governments can, should, and must act before the island is auctioned off in September, to make sure that no new septic systems are ever again permitted within 500 feet of Payette Lake.

Contact your city council and county commission members to request that they do exactly that.

David Simmonds, Big Payette Lake Water Quality Council, McCall

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