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Not fit for swimmers

Trouble from storm-water pipes might extend beyond Bay

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Whitefish Bay boasts on its Web site that there are two beaches for "sunning and swimming" on Lake Michigan inside village limits: the village-run Klode Park and the Milwaukee County-operated Big Bay Park.

It says nothing about a storm-water drainage pipe on the beach next to Big Bay Park testing positive several times last year for bacteria that indicates the presence of human waste. It doesn't say that the amount of fecal coliform in the rainwater tumbling out of the pipe after big storms has tested well beyond state standards for recreational use.

Village Engineer Mary Jo Lange knows about the problem plaguing the place, possibly the result of a sanitary sewer leaking into the storm-water sewer, which is supposed to carry only rainwater and melting snow.

Lange didn't know the village also advertises it as a place to swim.

"That's wrong," she said this week. "We'll have to change that."

The strip of beach along the narrow shoreline park isn't regularly tested for water quality, and it isn't one of the county's most visited swimming areas. Still, on hot summer days it is a popular place for neighborhood parents and children to splash in the surf and play in the sand.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee researcher Sandra McLellan said the Big Bay storm-water pipe is among the first lakeside storm-water outfalls in the county to be sampled for a genetic marker of bacteria found in human waste, and she has plans to dispatch sampling crews up and down the county shore this summer. The Big Bay pipe has tested positive for the bacteria four of the seven times it was sampled last year.

"There is a problem there," she said.

It also represents the tip of an emerging issue for southeastern Wisconsin beaches and, perhaps, for beaches in metropolitan areas around the Great Lakes.

McLellan said there are indications that there may be similar problems at Bradford Beach and South Shore Park in Milwaukee and Bay View Park in St. Francis.

McLellan estimates she'll be testing about 30 shoreline outfalls this summer.

"I didn't realize how many big pipes discharge right to the beach. I never really had an appreciation for it until I went from Doctors Park to Bay View," she said. "Pretty much every beach has a major storm-water outfall."

That includes the other Whitefish Bay beach at Klode Park.

Unlike Big Bay, however, Klode Park has been regularly monitored for E. coli levels, and warnings are posted when state thresholds are exceeded.

Although some strains of E. coli can be dangerous and even deadly, the type sampled for is itself not a big threat. But it is an indication of the presence of waste from a warm-blooded animal.

McLellan's testing, however, is looking for the first time for direct evidence of human waste, which is typically more dangerous than waste from other animals.

Storm-water pipes are a different issue from the well-publicized overflows of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District. They are presumed to carry only storm-water runoff and have therefore not been considered much of a pollution concern - until McLellan, working with grants from MMSD and the UW Sea Grant Institute, began sampling a small number of them around the county in 2005.

McLellan's initial testing shows that 27 of the 45 outfall pipes sampled showed evidence of fecal contamination, including one along the Menomonee River near Miller Park. That problem was diagnosed in March as an improper plumbing hookup at the stadium, and it has been fixed.

Solutions elsewhere likely won't be so simple.

McLellan speculates the underlying problem is that aged pipes are beginning to crack or crumble.

Whitefish Bay is just beginning to try to find the root of the problem, and it is no small task. The Big Bay pipe drains storm runoff from an area that has about 1,000 homes, Lange said.

She said the problem could be tied to leaking village sanitary lines, or private lines from individual properties that connect to the village system. She said it could also be linked to an MMSD sanitary line running through Whitefish Bay.

The village is in the midst of an \$11 million sewer upgrade that could solve the problem, but the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources might step in before that. DNR storm-water experts will be meeting with village officials within the next couple of weeks to discuss the problem.

A Milwaukee County parks official, meanwhile, said he is surprised that Whitefish Bay advertises Big Bay as a prime beach, particularly because its water is not tested regularly.

It is not listed on the county Web site as a swimming beach.

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