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Discarded smokes foul lake, beaches

By CHRISTOPHER DIEM Journal Staff Writer

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MARQUETTE - When people throw a cigarette butt on the road they might not imagine that its ultimate destination is Lake Superior.

But according to Carl Lindquist, director of the Superior Watershed Partnership, that is often the case.

Whenever it rains, Lindquist said cigarette butts thrown onto streets, sidewalks and parking lots are washed into the city's stormwater system. Larger refuse like paper cups or wrappers gets trapped in filters, but the smaller cigarette butts are carried through the stormwater system and deposited into Lake Superior.

"Everywhere you look, they're all over," Lindquist said as he stooped to pick up a cigarette butt from the beach near McCarty's Cove on the lakeshore in Marquette. "And then the prevailing currents carry them down. They'll come out here and get scattered all along the beach."

Lindquist said the paper in cigarette butts is biodegradable but cigarette filters are not.

The SWP is partnering with the Marquette City Police Department and the Marquette County Health Department to raise awareness about this problem.

The police department has not traditionally ticketed people for throwing cigarette butts on the ground, according to Chief Mike Angeli.

"Generally, we haven't because first of all, it's not witnessed that often by us and it's probably something that's on a lower priority," Angeli said.

However, Angeli said tossing cigarette butts could be considered littering and if witnessed, the department will enforce the law.

"If we see people tossing cigarettes out we'll stop them and cite them," he said. "If we happen to run across someone who's dumping an ashtray in the parking lot or it's reported to us, and we have sufficient information to follow up, we'll do that."

There will be a public awareness week starting Aug. 17, when law enforcement will concentrate on curbing cigarette littering, Angeli said.

In conjunction with efforts by law enforcement, the health department is promoting its smoking cessation clinics and other programs to help people quit smoking. For more information, visit the Web site www.mqthealth.org and click on the "resources to quit smoking" link.

The SWP conducts stream and beach cleanup events so there are opportunities for people to remove cigarette butts.

"But what's more exciting is to try and prevent this from occurring so much in our community," Lindquist said.

He said he's discussed the program with Great Lakes Cities Initiative, an organization based in Chicago that advocates the protection and restoration of the lakes.

"They think it's a great program and they are not aware of another program like it in the Great Lakes," Lindquist said, adding that he's already received positive feedback from the community.

"People have said, 'Finally, someone is doing something about this. Almost everyone said they had no idea that's how all those cigarette butts get on the beaches. They thought smokers just liked walking on the beach.'"

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