

# Health Officials Studying Salaries Of Sanitarians Across State, Area

BY RAHN ADAMS

In Brunswick County, where more septic tanks permits are requested than anywhere else in the state, the local health department is having trouble keeping its sanitarians from moving to other counties for higher pay and lighter workloads.

Within the past three months, two sanitarians have resigned to accept higher-paying positions in larger counties, according to Brunswick County Health Director Michael Barrett-Rhodes. He added that the two also cited heavy workloads here as another reason for leaving.

As a result, the Brunswick County Health Department is studying salary levels for sanitarians across the state and in southeastern North Carolina, in hopes of helping the department find and keep qualified sanitarians.

Although reviewing requests for septic tank permits is just a part of their jobs, sanitarians here spend much of their time doing site evaluations and then dealing with property owners who often don't understand why their lots aren't approved for septic tank permits, which is often the case in this rapidly-developing coastal county, said Barrett-Rhodes.

"If you make 15 to 20 contacts a day, it just takes its toll after a while," he said. "Sometimes they (sanitarians) are telling people what they don't want to hear, and that makes it more difficult."

Due to the high number of permit requests combined with the county's geographic location, the chances of having a septic tank permit denied is more likely in Brunswick County than anywhere else in the state—a situation which creates additional stress for local sanitarians, said Barrett-Rhodes.

According to a joint legislative study committee co-chaired by State Rep. David Redwine of Ocean Isle Beach, Brunswick County led the state last year in the number of site evaluations that were done, as well as in the number of septic tank permits that were both issued and denied.

About 5,000 site evaluations were done last year in Brunswick. Some 2,700 septic tanks permits were issued here, while 1,100 were denied, according to Redwine.

Counties with the second-highest figures in those categories included Wake, where 3,700 evaluations were done and 2,000 permits were issued; and Forsyth, where 568 permits were denied.

Barrett-Rhodes said each of his sanitarians does about 90 site evaluations per month. Their duties also include inspecting septic tanks as they are installed, examining repairs to existing septic systems, checking mobile homes that are moved to different sites, collecting water samples and inspecting restaurants and lodging facilities such as motels.

"It's a job that a lot of people don't understand and feel like it's a necessary evil, even though we're trying to protect the public," said local Environmental Health Supervisor John Crowder. "A sanitarian is not just an inspector; it goes beyond that. We are charged by our code of ethics to try to educate the public..."

The site evaluation, which generally takes about 15 minutes to do, involves studying the lot's topography, vegetation and soils. The sanitarian also uses a ground auger to check the



STAFF PHOTO BY RAHN ADAMS  
SANITARIAN GARY MCDONALD (right) uses a ground auger to check the soil during a site evaluation on a lot at Lakeshore Woods subdivision in Sunset Beach. Also pictured is trainee Ernest Romanowski, who expects to be certified this month.

water table and reach soil at least three feet deep.

But the sanitarian's work—especially on lots that are turned down—doesn't end when the site evaluation itself is completed. The sanitarian must meet with the property owner and explain the results of the evaluation.

"The growth in Brunswick County is such that you have a lot of people moving here from outside who don't even know what a septic tank is," Crowder said, noting that many newcomers are used to municipal sewer systems. "With them, it's very difficult for us to convey the importance of proper sewage disposal."

Local realtors and developers understand that importance and "by and large" have not been hard for

sanitarians to deal with, he added.

The health department currently employs five certified sanitarians and two trainees. One vacancy has yet to be filled. Both trainees are expected to be certified by the end of the summer, after they have completed at least six months of training.

Barrett-Rhodes said two additional sanitarian positions have been requested for the next budget year. Salary increases, however, were not requested.

At last month's Brunswick County Board of Health meeting, Crowder reported the results of a random survey of sanitarians' salaries in 18 counties across the state. The survey included the state's 10 fastest-growing counties.

Of those 18 counties, Crowder

found that sanitarians' salaries here ranked third from the bottom. In Brunswick, trainees receive \$17,027 per year, while sanitarians with about two years of experience earn \$17,464. In the other counties sampled, trainees are paid an average of

\$17,783, and experienced sanitarians receive an average of \$19,673, he said.

However, Brunswick's salaries appear to be "comparable" with those in other southeastern counties, according to a second survey Crowder

was completing last week.

Barrett-Rhodes said Crowder's studies would first be used by the health board to determine if local sanitarians are being underpaid. If so, the board could then consider recommending salary increases.

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