

NEW SEPTIC SYSTEM LAWS

Towns May Break Ground Monitoring Systems

BY TERRY POPE

Brunswick County's coastal towns that plan to keep a closer eye on alternative septic tank systems are legally "cutting new ground", said Milton Heath, assistant director of the N.C. Institute of Government in Chapel Hill.

Heath addressed a group of about 40 town and county leaders last week at an educational forum on new septic tank laws sponsored by the Brunswick County Cooperative Extension Service.

On July 1, new state laws will require stricter management and maintenance of alternative septic systems, which are blamed for polluting environmentally-sensitive estuarine waters and coastal nursery areas.

Included are low pressure pipe (LPP) systems that require a pump and series of small drain lines in soils where traditional septic systems will not function. There are an estimated 115 LPPs in use at Brunswick County homesites with some permits still pending.

Permits for alternative systems will not be issued after July 1 by the Brunswick County Health Department until the owner has a signed agreement with a licensed operator who routinely inspects the units.

The goal is to make sure LPPs are operating properly and not polluting the environment. Either towns or counties must set up "management entities" to oversee maintenance reports, to educate the public about septic tank laws and to rehabilitate failing systems.

Some towns, such as Holden Beach, have expressed an interest in setting up its own entity or inspection program.

"They think that if the toilet flushes, the system is working."

—Michael Hoover
N.C. State Soil Scientist

Michael Hoover, soil scientist and home waste management expert at N.C. State University, explained why LPPs are disliked.

"Sixty percent of the systems are not functioning effectively," said Hoover, "many because they are not maintained."

Alternative systems need more monitoring and maintenance than they are currently receiving, he said.

Other alternative systems use aerobic pumps or larger tanks but none of these are currently in use in Brunswick County.

"As we look at the next 15 to 20 years, what we're going to be left with are the more marginal soils that won't work," said Hoover. "We're going to be forced to use more and more alternative systems. So we need to get serious about management and maintenance."

Towns that want to form management entities are raising legal questions about their rights to crack down on owners with faulty systems, said Heath. Towns have the authority to maintain on-site septic systems and to adopt a tax or fee to cover their expenses.

Towns and sanitary districts also have the right to enter onto private property to inspect for faulty systems, Heath said.

However, towns cannot get involved in permitting or overstep the

authority of the local health department which follows state health rules. Otherwise, a conflict would arise, said Heath.

"I don't think you can win that kind of legal battle," he said.

Currently, towns have authority to impose management entity fees but cannot place liens on property to collect ones overdue, as is done with delinquent taxes. But a group of four counties in northeast North Carolina are lobbying legislators to have that law changed during the summer session of the N.C. General Assembly, said Heath.

Towns will also have access to maintenance records kept by the health departments.

"We already have a management entity that will require records like that be kept," said Michael Rhodes, Brunswick County health director.

According to Heath, after July 1 towns can either count on the health department to serve as its management entity; form their own management program with local ordinances; work an agreement with the N.C.

Department of Environmental Health and Natural Resources; or designate a public management entity.

The need for more maintenance grew from studies of coastal septic tank systems.

What soil experts battle is a myth that septic tanks are a greater source of coastal pollution than municipal sewer plants, said Hoover.

"There is no out of sight, out of mind," he added. "They think that because it's out of sight, it has no impact."

Sewer plants discharge treated wastewater into streams or rivers that feed into the ocean. Faulty septic tanks may filter into coastal waters. Towns considering a sewer plant should hire an engineer familiar with small communities, prepare to pay for good planning, formulate a management plan and seek help from state and federal sources, said Hoover.

Calabash and Sunset Beach are both studying plans for community sewer systems.

North Carolina leads the nation in the number of on-site sewer systems installed, from 40,000 to 50,000 annually, said Hoover.

An estimated 54 percent of the state's homes rely on on-site systems, and few of the homeowners think about preventive maintenance.

"They think that if the toilet flushes, the system is working," he said.



STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG BUTLER

Waiting Her Turn

Alyssa Varnum of Varnamtown waits to throw balls at the dunking booth during Coastline Volunteer Rescue Squad's Spring Fling Easter weekend. The event raised \$3,500 in cash and \$457 in pledges to be used to purchase a new ambulance and equipment. Performers included Miss Brunswick County Crystal Williams, the Cedar Grove Choir and Brunswick County Cloggers.

Giant Yard Sale To Help Hospice

Lower Cape Fear Hospice will hold a giant yard sale Saturday, May 2, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Camp United Methodist Church, Main Street, Shallotte.

The sale will offer clothing, furniture, household items, books, baked goods, refreshments and more.

A May 9 rain date has been set.

Hospice serves the terminally ill and their families in a six-county area that includes Brunswick County. The agency operates an office at Sunward Office Building in Shallotte.

Demo Candidates At Sunday Rally

District 4 of the Brunswick County Democratic Party offers voters one last chance to meet all local Democratic candidates for state and county office at a rally Sunday afternoon.

The event will be held at 1 p.m. at the Democratic Headquarters building in Bolivia, where barbecue chicken will be served.



Farmers Home Moving Today

The federal Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) will move its furnishings today (Thursday) and Friday from its location at the Brunswick County Government Center to Promenade Office Park, 143 Holden Beach Road, Units 1 and 2, in Shallotte.

Offices will be closed all day today and until 1 p.m. Friday. Ted C. Rivenbark Jr., county supervisor, said the agency has been asked by the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners to move out to help relieve the space shortage at the government center.

"We've been here since the center opened," said Rivenbark. FmHA employs three full-time staff members besides Rivenbark and a temporary employee in the summer. "In addition, we will have a full-time appraiser working out of our office, but not part of it," he said.

The agency services federal housing and farm loans in the county, a job that has grown considerably in the recent recessionary years, according to Rivenbark.

The new mailing address is FmHA, P.O. Box 2120, Shallotte, N.C. 28459, and the new telephone number is 919-754-4880. Any appointments or phone calls after today (Thursday) should be made at the new location.

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