

Septic System Pilot Project 2011

Background

This project, coordinated by Bambi Miller of the Strafford County Conservation District and funded through the Lamprey River Advisory Committee's Small Grant Program, developed a model to provide septic system outreach to landowners through community education and individual property visits. The purpose of this voluntary program was to help landowners get the most out of their system to save money, extend the life of their system, and protect the Lamprey River and the Great Bay Estuary water resources from contaminations caused by failed systems. Most houses along the Lamprey River have septic systems to accept and treat waste water. As a pilot program, the intended audience was fifteen landowners whose properties abut the river. Those residents who had never owned a septic system, felt their system was not functioning properly, or were planning changes that would affect their septic systems were especially encouraged to learn more.

As a first step, residents of Lee and Durham (Strafford County) were invited to attend a community presentation in each town. A home visit was arranged for those interested in learning more about their private septic system. Prior to the visit, the landowner was requested to obtain engineering plans for the septic system from the town hall.

The home visits lasted around one and a half hours and involved reviewing the septic system plans, walking around the property, and identifying practices that either impair or enhance the proper functioning of a septic system. The visit also included information about soils on the property and how different soils affect septic system performance. Homeowners were encouraged to ask questions and air their concerns. Several homeowners reviewed their plans for the property and how future waste water treatment would be handled. At the end of the visit, the homeowners were given a list of desired actions and a handout for future reference.

Findings

Community presentations provided an important opportunity for residents to learn about septic systems in general, but home visits proved to be even more valuable for both homeowners and people working to protect clean water in the river. Homeowners were given assurances that visits would be confidential and that no environmental regulatory consequences would ensue as a result of the visit. The confidential nature of the visits proved to be one of the project's greatest assets.

Most homeowners knew very little about their septic systems. For some who had only recently moved to the area, this project was their first opportunity to learn that they had a septic system and were not connected to a town sewer. Most homeowners had never seen or reviewed the engineering plans for their septic system. Most homeowners did not know the age of their septic system or where it was located on the property. Given this lack of knowledge, most did not know how to maintain their system.

Several practices were identified during the home visits that impair septic function. The following suggestions were offered to homeowners to keep their septic systems functioning longer and more effectively:

- Have the septic system pumped at least every three years. Make sure the pumper checks baffles to make sure they are working.
- Keep deep-rooted trees and shrubs off the septic (leach) field. Leave grasses and other smaller plants.
- Do not use the septic field for parking or storage of equipment or buildings.
- Do not put anything bulkier than toilet paper down the drain. Do not dispose of garbage, cigarette butts, food waste, grease, chemicals, or medications down the drain. Dispose of harmful and non-biodegradable materials and substances with regular rubbish.
- Spread clothes washings over the week. Avoid doing all the laundry on one day.
- Avoid using bleach and other harsh chemicals.
- Do not direct water from roofs or paved areas to the septic field.

For more information

The Environmental Protection Agency has collected much of the information homeowners need to understand and maintain their septic systems. This information is available on their website at <https://www.epa.gov/septic>.

The Granite State Designers and Installers Association has created a very helpful file that describes how septic systems work, how to keep them working effectively, and provides an organized folder to keep track of maintenance and other pertinent septic system issues. They also keep a list of qualified septic system professionals who can help you maintain your system. The association can be contacted at 603-228-1231 or <http://www.gsdia.org/>.