Septic System Woes

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Owning a home can be crappy ... no pun intended.

My husband, Ryan, and I bought our house in February last year. We purchased it from my grandmother after she vacated it and it seemed like a dream come true. Everything just fell into place with it and we were so excited to have more space and a house to call our own.

Our enthusiasm waned last summer when the pressure tank in our well died and we didn't have water for more than three days because the thing just happened to die on a Friday night.

Luckily, a replacement pressure tank solved that problem and we haven't had any problem with the well since (knock on wood!).

We thought our worries were over, at least in terms of catastrophic failures. We've been happily planning the different improvements we'd like to make; remodel the kitchen so there's more space for people to get around each other, expand the bathroom so I can finally have my dream bathtub complete with jacuzzi jets, finish the garage off so Ryan has a place to work on projects.

That was, until, we started to notice water in the yard just before last Christmas.

We called Richards Septic Tank Services and set up an appointment for someone to come out and look at what could be going on. Thankfully, no sewage had backed up into our house (and still hasn't, again, knock on wood!).

The man from Richards came out to our house amid snow on the ground and below freezing temperatures only to tell me he needed to have the top of the tank cleared of ice, snow and dirt before he could get a look at anything. Ryan cleared the area and unearthed the top of the tank; the man from Richards came back the next day.

Since it was snowing and the ground was lightly frozen, only one of the tanks was accessible. That got pumped, but the questions we had about what could be causing the issue largely remained unanswered. The rest of the system needed to be unearthed before we could really know what was going on. We were left with instructions to baby it as much as we could by conserving as much water as possible.

In the intervening months, the problem seemed to have gone away. Having at least one of the tanks pumped seemed to have helped and I was cautiously optimistic that maybe the problem just resolved on its own.

No such luck.

A few weeks ago, Ryan noticed water in the yard again. I called Richards back again, and this time we got Ron Richards himself, the owner of the company, to come out and take a look. Ryan uncovered part of the other tank, what's referred to as a dry well (I believe) so we could all have a better look at what's going on.

Ron did not have good news for us. He said the system was likely a hodgepodge someone put together themselves when the house was built in the 1960s, before environmental regulations were a twinkle in the health department's eye. The system we have stands as a relic of a simpler and more contaminated time.

Our next step, according to Ron, was to get the health department out to our house to see what we would be working with to put in a new system complete with a drain field, which is something we're lacking right now, essentially.

Someone came out, bored into our front yard to take soil samples, and delivered the unfortunate news we would need pretty much our entire front yard to be excavated of the fill dirt and clay in it now, filled with clean wash sand and made into the drain field for the new system.

Oh, and did I mention it was $252 to obtain a permit for this appointment and for putting the system in?

Well, the man from the health department then discovered we share a well with another residence and informed us the new drain field would need to be 75 feet from the well instead of the standard 50 feet for one residence. That combined with the size of the drain field he was proposing added up to too little space in the yard to meet the specifications.

Since it was above this guy's pay grade to tell use we could do something other than what he was proposing, he scheduled a time with us to meet with him and his supervisor at the beginning of this week.

Our options, we learned, are to drill a new well to bring the distance back down to 50 feet, to put in a new system with a smaller drain field than what they're suggesting and sign a repair agreement acknowledging the system isn't up to regulation which could hurt the resale value of the home or to cover up what we've got now and hope for the best.

None of these are super great options. Lucky for us, the house won't be condemned due to these issues, but either way you slice it we are looking at a pretty hefty bill when all is said and done.

We have yet to decide on an option. It feels a little like we are forced into a corner by a plethora of less than ideal options. I find myself longing for the days of renting when it was someone else's problem if something went wrong.

On the upside, if we get this fixed, we should be good to go, right? Right? RIGHT?

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