Statewide septic regulations could help curtail Pine River contamination

By Rosemary Horvath
For the Herald

A decades old proposition to curtail the number of faulty septic systems has yet to die in Lansing.

State Rep. Jim Lower, R-Cedar Lake, assured members of the Healthy Pine River citizens group last Thursday that progress is being made in Lansing for a statewide ordinance that he supports.

Gratiot, Montcalm and Clinton counties that make up the district of the Mid-Michigan District Health Department had contemplated pushing for a 3-county ordinance. But Lower and MMDHD Health Officer Marcus Cheatham voiced support for a uniform ordinance covering the entire state.

Michigan is the only state without a statewide sanitary code. Counties have the authority to set their own standards and fees. For example, parcels or properties for sale that have a well for drinking water and/or a septic system for sewage disposal must have inspections completed prior to closing.

Lower said if realtors can be brought on board, chances are good that legislation would pass in Lansing.

Septic systems are wastewater treatment systems that use septic tanks and drain fields to dispose of sewage. Regular maintenance is required, although too often ignored or property owners simply are not aware work should be done. A licensed operator should be hired to pump out septic tanks every two to three years.

Cheatham explained at a previous meeting the health department cannot investigate suspected faulty systems without a filed complaint.

According to member Jane Keon, an Evergreen Village resident had discovered feces floating in the water east of Horse Creek. Michigan Department of Environmental Quality had been contacted. Cheatham said the health department also will investigate.

There is no doubt inefficient septic systems are a contributor to the quality of rivers and streams. Lower noted that the Flat River in Montcalm County has become impacted by septic systems around the Six Lakes area. Both Gratiot and Clinton counties have recorded similar issues.

Lower said that the Michigan Township Association has made a statewide septic ordinance a priority, mainly because having individual townships or counties set a variety of requirements is not preferred.

Water sampling
HPR board chairman Gary Rayburn of Alma distributed a map and schedule for river monitoring to MDEQ began last week at different points along the Pine River. Some of these had been recommended by citizens monitoring requests. Tested will be nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen, blue-green algal toxin, macroinvertebrate and habitat surveys.

“They are looking for sources upstream on the river and the tributaries,” Keon said explained.

Watershed management
Clinton County Conservation District that recently received funding to implement a watershed management plan will be tapped to share their experience to benefit the Gratiot Conservation District. Only three plans in the state received approval. Rayburn said Clinton’s new director has been invited to attend the next HPR meeting in August. There will be no July meeting.

New board members
Randall Mead of St. Louis and Wayne Brooks of Alma were elected to fill two vacancies on the HPR board.

HPR meets at 7 p.m. at the Alma Public Library.