County commissioners learn of health department issues

By Rosemary Horvath
Staff Writer
Mid-Michigan District Health Department has hired a new environmental health director, according to District Health Officer Marcus Cheatham. Liz Braddock has been the Chief of Food Shelter and Prevention Programs for the Oakland County Health Department.
Cheatham envisions she will reboot the food program and bring new ideas to the district composed of Gratiot, Montcalm and Clinton counties.
The Oakland County district health department serves a population of 1.2 million.
Population of the three counties here falls just under 190,000.
But Cheatham said Braddock and her husband look forward to a change of pace.
Cheatham relayed the news at the annual commissioner’s forum held in Carson City last week.
Only county board chairman George Bailey represented Gratiot County.
Cheatham noted that their combined arrangement eliminates duplication and draws a savings of $300,000.
“This allows us to spend more money across the three counties on programs that some other rural health departments don’t have,” he said.
Medical Director Jennifer Morse, MD reviewed vapor intrusion which she said is an evolving issue.
And she reviewed “the growing concern around the state” of faulty septic systems.
Vapor intrusion occurs when there is a migration of vapor-forming chemicals from any subsurface source into an overlying building.
Older gas stations and dry-cleaning facilities could have a build-up of evaporated volatile chemicals that turn into a gas.
DNAPL, TCE, PCE, PERC and benzene are examples of VOCs.
A gas can migrate from contaminated soil and groundwater through cracks in a foundation, floor or walls and openings for utility lines.
VI has become a growing concern. Governor Snyder has allocated monies in the 2018 budget to investigate and remediate sites.
Experts have estimated as many as 4,000 sites have been exposed to VI.
Gratiot County has had an ongoing investigation into the quality of the Pine River.
Samples of high levels of E. coli bacteria have been found at several locations on certain days.
Clinton County also has discovered high levels of the bacteria within the Upper Maple River Watershed.
Besides the possibility of runoff from farm fields, another source can be the impact of on-site wastewater treatment systems.
Michigan has not followed the 49 other states in the union of having a statewide set of requirements for septic systems. Although some counties have developed ordinances of their own.
If the district health department were to have an ordinance, all three counties
would have to approve the same requirements.
According to 2010 data, Gratiot had a total of 16,339 households of which
8,808 were served by on-site septic systems.
Gratiot board Chairman Bailey doubted if low-income households had the
means to replace their septic systems.
“There is no real simple fix without help from state and federal government,”
he said.
North Star and Rainbow Lake put in their own sewer systems.
Bailey supported an idea to require repairs or a new system at the point a
property sells.
New septic do need permits from the health department, Cheatham said.
He added that the health department now has new software that will be used
to track when a system is installed and when regular maintenance is required.
This summer the Shiawassee Conservation District was awarded $839,828 to
repair or replace failing on-site septic systems.
Funding also was provided to implement agricultural best management
practices in the Upper Maple River Watershed.
Funding is under the federal Clean Water Act – Section 319 and the Clean
Michigan Initiative – Nonpoint Source Pollution Control Grants Program.
In August, the Gratiot Conservation District was notified it will receive
funding to draft a Pine River Watershed Management Plan which will address
recommendations for different issues, including septic systems.
Funding was allocated in the fiscal year 2017 federal budget signed in May.
Once a grant agreement between the EPA and Michigan Department of
Environmental Quality is signed, the DEQ will develop a grant agreement with
the Gratiot Conservation District, according to Bob Day, Nonpoint Source
Unit Supervisor, Water Resources Division.