

# Gratiot board reviews next chapter of sanitary code



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## By Rosemary Horvath Herald Staff Writer

Rural property owners may not know they own septic systems and that these systems require maintenance because poop goes somewhere.

A report entitled Failing Septic Systems in Mid-Michigan: An Unseen Threat to Public Health indicates the somewhere is likely groundwater and the nearest creek or drain or river.

Public Sector Consultants compiled the report at the behest of the Mid-Michigan Water Quality Management Committee composed of community members.

Funding became available through the Clinton Conservation District and its partners the Mid-Michigan District Health Department, Gratiot Conservation District and Montcalm Conservation District.

Identifying sources of high bacteria levels in an area dependent on water quality and water recreation is the utmost goal.

As Gratiot County County Commission Chairman George Bailey, a member of the management committee, recently reported of the 44,000 septic systems in Gratiot, Montcalm and Clinton counties, at least a third are faulty.

Surveys indicate a high percentage of residents were unaware their properties even had a septic system.

And many were unaware septic tanks and drain fields ought to be inspected at least every five years, if needed.

Jon Beard of the Lansing-based public policy research and consulting firm PSC walked the Gratiot County commissioners through the finished report at the meeting on July 17.

The report recommends changes to the current sanitary code.

These include:

A discharge permit for all developed properties not connected to a municipal or community sewer system. This includes residential, commercial, agricultural and industrial structures.

All septic systems are to be inspected at least every ten years, based on a probability of failure.

Pumping and maintenance would depend on necessity.

Whenever pumping occurs, a report must be submitted to the health department where a record will be maintained.

The report states under this four-step approach a septic system could be inspected three to six times over its anticipated 30-year lifespan.

Health Officer Marcus Cheatham acknowledged that the proposed ordinance addresses only septic systems even though there are other sources of pollution in the Pine River.

Targeting human sewage is the first step, he said.

“We know the risks and hot spots. We will start with the riskiest and get the dirty places cleaned up,” he said.

Presence of human sewage has been confirmed at locations throughout the Upper Pine River, Looking Glass River, Pine-Chippewa River and Flat River watersheds.

All three county boards have received the proposal.

Now it is up to one to move on adoption, Cheatham said. All three boards must vote approval for the ordinance to take effect.

Cheatham would like to see action by September.

One area targeted is Riverdale in Seville Township where some failing systems are discharging into a nearby creek.

Environmental Health Director Liz Braddock said three homes remain of the 14 originally contacted that have not responded to the health department.

It is unclear whether these three have a septic system at all.

The last resort for Braddock would be to obtain a warrant to enter the premises. Red dye poured into a toilet tank would eventually drain out into the creek to prove an illicit discharge, she said.

Braddock and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality are discussing the issue with Seville Township Board of Trustees and a possibility about funding a community sewage lagoon system for the Riverdale area.

Costs of replacing or fixing a septic system can be substantial for a property owner.

The report highlights some funding options such as Michigan State Housing Development Authority Property Improvement Loan Program.

The three counties also may establish a revolving loan program or some other type of financial assistance program.

The Gratiot Conservation District will become eligible for government funding once its Pine River Watershed Management Plan is completed.

Both the conservation district website and the health department website has information about maintaining septic systems and finding resources to help finance the costs.

The Upper Pine River watershed is approximately 308 square miles. It originates in Mecosta County and flows south into corners of Isabella and Montcalm and into Gratiot. Eventually, the river flows into the Chippewa River in Midland County and to the Tittabawassee and finally, the Saginaw River.