RIVERDALE FINDS ALLY IN STATE SENATE

Posted on Wednesday, November 20th, 2019 and is filed under News. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.

Rick Outman Throws Support Behind Effort To Keep Septic Systems Private

OUTMAN

By Rosemary Horvath
Herald Staff Writer

Critical of what he describes as the state’s “one-sided, one-solution attitude,” for rectifying Riverdale’s septic system issues, resident and Citizens Committee chairman Bob Lombard may have a potential heavyweight in that community’s corner.

For the past few months, Lombard and committee members have waged a grassroots battle with the Water Resource Division, Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy, who have been pushing the Seville Township community to find a long-term solution for its septic problems.

Instead of lawsuits and pitchforks, the group says that they have remedied the exceedingly high levels of E. coli bacteria that were measured two years ago in the Pine River, which came as a result of the faulty systems.

Recent samples show, however, that the problems have ceased, according to Lombard.

“From the 175 samples taken since September, our numbers prove we have identified all the polluters,” he said. Owners either have installed new septics or have a pump and haul contract, said Lombard. And one property which was troublesome has been vacated and will not be reoccupied. Five property owners have permits pending with the district health department to install new systems.

“There is only one property we are not sure of,” Lombard summed up, but even this wouldn’t be enough to issue a citation.

Still, it appears EGLE is not satisfied with the efforts, and continues advocating for a community sanitary system as the only preferred solution.

“Where is your evidence we’re still polluting?” Lombard questions of the agency. “Keeping our systems private makes more sense because the soil and lot sizes for new systems are not an issue.”

Outman, whose family tree is planted in Riverdale, has worked with state government for decades. First as a state legislature, then a Senate aide, and now, a Senator.

His great-grandfather built the Riverdale Tavern that his cousin now operates.

As a member of various Senate committees, including Environmental Quality and Natural Resources, and the third generation owner of a Montcalm County excavating company, Outman is well versed in septic systems.
Such is why Seville Township Supervisor Tish Mallory invited him to the last township board meeting. “I’ve been excavating my whole life,” he said in a phone interview with The Herald. “So not only do I have the practical experience, but my bachelor of science degree is in biology.”

He mentioned his qualifications to Liesl Eichler Clark, who was appointed this year as EGLE director when he broached the Riverdale situation with her.

“I can’t guarantee I can stop this but I feel I have a good shot at it,” Outman said of advocating for Riverdale’s choice of private septic systems.

One obvious problem is to come up with a solution for the properties contracting for pump and haul sewage for which Outman said he would like to find a long-term fix.

Another drawback is that the health department has no record when or if septic systems were installed, an issue Lombard and Citizens Committee member Mikie VanHorn have worked this year to rectify.

Outman said septic systems will fail by design if not properly maintained. But even with that, the expected life is 20 to 25 years.

Although the USDA Rural Development could cover 75 percent of building a community sanitary system, the remaining 25 percent would be left up to the township and individual property owners. That could be around $15,000 per property.

Outman explained the cost of a new septic system and drain field is based on the number of bedrooms in a dwelling. He said this is the best gauge to determine the number of occupants.

Outman and 70th District State Rep. Jim Lower, R-Greenville, continue to collaborate on a regional solution. A few years ago, Lower attempted to push for a statewide septic ordinance but the proposed legislation failed.

Outman is aware of the E. coli bacteria problem in waterways throughout his district. He lives near the Flat River in Montcalm County that shows elevated levels of E. coli bacteria derived from human waste from failing septic systems. Some areas are installing sanitary systems.

As for Riverdale, Outman said, “I’m hoping to find a better way for them.”
PFAS: What you need to know

Craig Lyons  Lansing State Journal  USA TODAY NETWORK - MICHIGAN

What is PFAS?

PFAS are a group of man-made chemicals used in waterproof coatings, nonstick coatings, upholstery, carpeting, paper food wrappings and firefighting foam, the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy said. PFAS do not break down in the environment.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has called PFAS a growing contaminant of concern.

How prevalent is PFAS contamination?

Most people have a PFAS compound in their blood, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services said. But since the chemical is being phased out, a CDC study said levels found in people’s blood is decreasing overall. The EPA said companies started to end production of certain PFAS compounds in 2002.

What is concerning about PFAS?

Studies have identified potential links between PFAS and increased cholesterol levels; increased risk of thyroid disease; decreased fertility in woman; lower infant birth weights; and an increased risk of cancer, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry said. Federal health agencies say they cannot directly link PFAS exposure to health conditions and more studies are needed.

How are people exposed to PFAS?

People are exposed to PFAS by drinking contaminated water; eating food packaged in materials that contain PFAS; using consumer products that contain PFAS; and eating fish caught from PFAS-contaminated water sources, ATSDR said.

Is drinking water safe?

Michigan tested public water systems, schools on well water systems and tribal water systems. The 2018 study found 90% of the drinking water sources sampled did not have elevated levels of PFAS. Sampling found high PFAS levels in 3% of the water sources.

Two water systems, in Parchment, Michigan, and Robinson Elementary School in Grand Haven, exceeded safe limits. The state says when drinking water exceeds 70 parts per trillion of PFAS, people should drink bottled or filtered waters.

The state did test private well systems for schools, day cares and other child care facilities.

If people have questions about their drinking water, they can call the state’s Environmental Assistance Center at 1-800-662-9278.

Sources: Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry; Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Contact reporter Craig Lyons at 517-377-3047 or calyons@lsj.com.
PFAS contamination hits Grand Ledge military base

Craig Lyons  Lansing State Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK – MICHIGAN

GRAND LEDGE – Michigan environmental regulators know PFAS contamination exists at a Grand Ledge Michigan National Guard facility. Now, they want to know to what extent the contamination went beyond the site.

The Michigan Army National Guard has agreed to do more sampling of groundwater at its Grand Ledge facility to see if per- and polyfluoralkyl substances, known as PFAS, contamination is a wider problem for the city of Grand Ledge and the rural communities nearby.

“It is unknown whether an unacceptable risk of PFOA or PFOS contamination exists in these residential water supplies, or if the water supplies are threatened by an as yet unidentified contamination,” the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy wrote in a July letter to the National Guard.

The Grand Ledge facility has a key red flag that's generated PFAS concerns across Michigan and the country: Aqueous film-forming foam, which is commonly used for firefighter training.

Capt. Joe Legros, a spokesman for the Michigan Army National Guard, said the National Guard is working on further investigation and will figure out how big the problem is. He said the agency is working with the state and community to keep people informed.

See GRAND LEDGE, Page 6A

PFAS-containing sample water is taken during work at Michigan State University's Fraunhofer Center for Coatings and Diamond Technologies in 2018. DERRICK L. TURNER/MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

“PFAS contamination is a serious issue and we need to take action to protect public health and ensure our water supply is safe and clean.”

Rep. Tim Walberg  R-Tipton

Inside

PFAS: What you need to know about the environmental crisis. 6A
In a Michigan town with a toxic legacy, residents fought for decades to heal

BILLY NUGENT AND JIM MALHEW
Bridge Magazine

ST. LOUIS — Jim Kelly didn’t like his town’s toxic reputation. It was bad for business, bad for growth. So Kelly, then a city councilman, wrote a grant in 1996 when a group of rabidly-roused residents formed the Pine River Superfund Citizens Task Force, calling on the federal government to destroy the water flowing through the heart of St. Louis. The small Gratiot County community was already notorious as a polluted ground for, among other things, a 1937 cattle feed mix that became one of the worst chemical disasters in American history.

To Kelly’s chagrin, the newly formed task force loudly urged the federal government to remove the toxic sludge polluting Pine River fish. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had just flagged astronomical levels of DDT in the river. The pesticides, long banned by the state and federal government, had oozed from the site of a former chemical plant responsible for the cattle feed mix — even though state and federal officials had declared it safe years before.

“We’d just taken a terrible beating ever that for years and years. We didn’t want more headaches,” Kelly, now 67, said.

But 21 years later, Kelly, now St. Louis mayor, thanks the activists for rousing a failing city that had eaten the task force “the best thing that ever happened to our city.” The city of 7,000 on the geographic center of Michigan, was on the verge of bankruptcy.

The task force’s founders initially figured the cleanup would last just a few years — five tops. But the group of roughly 30 people is still at it in 2019, meeting every month to watch government projects to clear the water and engage in projects to improve the waterfront.

Residents throughout Michigan have faced different types of chemical contamination in their drinking water and wastewater. But the collection of chemical contamination in St. Louis is unique. The state and federal government had their way: the city has been cleaned up a long time ago without really being cleaned up.

It’s unclear when — or if — the task force will declare its mission accomplished.

The cleanup “probably will not be finished in my lifetime,” said Anne Sinks, 71, a founding member of the group. “I think it’ll be our children and grandchildren that see that. It’ll be forever pristine. It’ll never be restored. We want it as good as we can get it.”

THE TRIALS OF ST. LOUIS

St. Louis started in one of the worst mass poisonings in American history: the PBB scare of the 1970s, which tainted Michigan food supplies and exposed vulnerabilities in state and federal bureaucracies. Michigan Chemical Corp., a manufacturer of many chemical compounds at its 54-acre plant on the banks of the Pine River, among the first companies to use polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), in 1937, the company ran out of “pre-printed bags” for its products. That led workers to package PCB to a nearby mercaptan factory to be mixed with like products in a special window for reaction.

“Within a month, the PBB exposure caused a rash that then spread to the three of his daughter’s sister in 1966. His father was of higher concern when he was diagnosed with cancer in 1997 to discuss the findings with the public, they gathered with protest and to hear the angry and scared faces. The effort went to the meeting

It “wasn’t until I realized I was checking that I thought, ‘man, there’s more poison in the rivers’.” Hall said about his family’s health struggles. “It’s not proven, but I wonder whether PCB exposure had something to do with it.”

Since the residents of St. Louis have not only grappled with the contamination the company exposed, but those that is left behind. And they’re not limited to PBB. All the while, the company dumped massive amounts of its industrial waste into the Pine River. In the 1980s, it also began disposing of waste at other nearby dump sites. No animals lived in the river. A group complained of foul odors, paint peeling off cars, and houses. Gardens died near the chemical plant.

The residents’ crusade back to St. Louis in 1976, where she lived with her husband and her daughter, who closed down the plant.

“All they had to do was come miles down the river to us and still smell like a swimming pool.”

The plant was sold to a Pennsylvania, parent company, Veolia, agreed to continue the cleanup and paid the residents $3,500 in exchange for the state dropping the lawsuit against the company.

To contain the pollution, Veolia expanded the plant to remove toxic soil from other dumps to the plant site and treated it all under a clay cap and installed an underground wall between the contamination and the water system.

“They left Michigan in the mid-2000s and we were told everything was taken care of,” said Lauren, who is also a longstanding member of the citizens’ task force.

THE LONG ROAD TO REMEDIATION

Just a decade after Ve-

sical buried the plant site, EPA and Michigan to check on the containment. The Michigan discovered 13 million gallons of wastewater that had escaped the system and was now envi- ronmentally damaged. The site was sued in 2003 for the oil spill. Studies of fish and sediment in the river showed PCB levels higher than any that had been recorded in the United States. Since 2000, it has been a constant source of health problems. The plant site was finally removed in 2019. The city is now trying to develop the land for other uses.

“Every one of us is a tombstone!” My daughter’s perfect example of how to deal with a problem.

“Fired through the iron to spread the message of DDT to the U.S. military and, afterward, as a pesticide and a defoliant.”

Continues on Page 1
Continued from Page 2

hoping they wouldn't work near the plant site because she feared the toxic sed-iment drifting down to her and her family. "We were concerned about the health of our children, and it was very, very scary," she said. "It had to be dealt with somehow."

The EPA, found so much community in-terest, decided in 1980 to help start a St. Louis chapter of a newly-formed community outreach method known as Community Advisory Group (CAG). That’s where Keen, Lorenz, Hall and others of the long-term fight first got involved.

Gary Smith, the group’s treasurer, worked at Michigan Chemical in the plant’s nearby neighborhood as the group’s second chance to make St. Louis livable and a feeling of betrayal that government agencies the site to protect residents the first time around.

The commitment “didn’t get done right. The plant site wasn’t done right, the river wasn’t done right, we’ve got all these other problems,” he said. So this time?

“Community’s going to stay in-
volved,” he said.

That involvement led to a number of victories for the area that might not have happened otherwise.

Shortly after founding, the group per-suaded the University of Michigan Law School to help it enter a bankruptcy case seeking insurance money from Fruit of the Loom, then-Velsicol’s parent company. The U.S. Department of Justice later signed on and the group won in 2002, splitting the money with other sites nationwide that had been affected by Velsicol’s pollution.

In another case, residents who lived near Michigan Chemical plant noticed birds dying in the early 2000s, stag-gering into yards before keeling over, even dropping dead mid-flight. Residents asked the state to investigate to no avail. So the task force used 15,000 won from an earlier contamination settlement to hire a Michigan State University researcher to investigate. He found some of the high-
est DDT concentrations on record in wild birds, which had been feeding on contam-inated worms, grubs and insects. Those creatures were poisoned by the soil.

In 2005, St. Louis residents learned a DDT byproduct had also tainted their drinking water, despite government assur-
dances in the 1980s that the sys-
tem was clean. The city passed for Vels-
icol’s parent company to pay for a new water supply. The EPA and the U.S. De-
partment of Justice reportedly opposed the deal. With help from the city, the city spent $27 million from Velsicol and some additional money from EPA. That helped start a new system with nearby Alma, finished in 2010.

Through it all, their relationship with EPA and the state has been complicated. Many members said that from the begin-
ing, they were skeptical of the Community Advisory Group’s efforts and that it didn’t always sit well with their federal counterparts.

Keen said the conflict boils down to in-
centives. At many other Superfund sites, there’s a notion that’s still responsible for cleanup. But Velsicol largely got out of paying for remediation in St. Louis, meaning it’s an “orphan site” and taxpayers pay for the cleanup. “Who’s going to push EPA at an orphan site?” Keen said. "It has to be the citizens, and they don’t like that. They feel like we should just sit back and let things and not complain, but we can’t.

We’ve not built that way.

EPA public affairs specialist Adrian Paloneque wrote in an email to Bridge that, while the groups weren’t “developed to provide oversight of EPA.” It has made changes based on input from the Pine Riv-
er group of residents affected.

“EPA is committed to working with” groups, the St. Louis community impacted by contamination and cleanup challenges, beyond just providing infor-
mation,” Paloneque said.

THE NEW FIGHT AGAINST PFAS

Decades after the St. Louis group be-

en watchdogging the cleanup in their town, new groups around Michigan re-

embarking on their own journeys to hold polluters accountable.

The main culprit for these communities is PFAS, a collection of industrial chemicals that can lead to increased risk of cancer, thyroid problems, immune system problems and low infant birth weights.

In Rockford and surrounding areas in Kent County, the shoe company Wolverine Worldwide used PFAS for years to make products water- and stain-resistant and it leached into the aquifer providing drinking water to hundreds of residents who rely on private wells.

Citizens affected by Wolverine’s pollu-
tion have come together to form their own CAG. Their group is new, but many of its members have already had their own worst case scenario in guerrilla activism and in their first few meetings, they’ve helped stop an EPA-approved plan for Wolverine to move waste to a dump site that’s affected nearby residents.

And they know what they’re getting into. CAG member Jennifer Carney has PFAS levels twice as high as the federal action level in the well she, her husband and two children — then 7 and 14 — had been drinking. When she found out and started lobbying for change with her neighbors, she said, “I accepted it as our new life.”

“If it’s going to be 20 years, then I’ll fight it for 20 years. That’s the hand that we were dealt,” she said.

A different crop of activism is sprout-
ing in Oscoda, where PFAS from fire-fight-
ing foam at the shuttered Wurtsmith Air Force base have leached into drinking water and bubbled into toxic foam that rings the beaches of Van Eren Lake, once a popular tourist destination.

In 2016, the Air Force reinstat-
ed a Restoration Advisory Board at Wurtsmith, created under a federal law purposed to bolster citizen participa-
tion in Department of Defense cleanups. But community members make up just a portion of the group, which includes the state, local and federal officials, including the Air Force.

On the spot, a retired EPA engineer and Oscoda who serves as the board co-
chair, acknowledges its limits in watchdogging the Air Force’s work.

“It’s not activism,” he told Bridge. Yet the board plays a crucial role in granting

the public access to cleanup documents and allowing residents to ask the Air Force questions, with answers added into public record, Larche added. A grassroots group called Neat Our Water (NOW) also formed in 2017 to plug the gap in activism, calling for quicker action from the Air Force and state regulators to enforce Michigan cleanup laws.

Cathy Wusterbarth, who co-founded NOW in 2017, said just five core members share a heavy workload, but she’s optimist the group has grabbed the state’s attention. Since the rally, Attorney Gen-
eral Dana Nessel has visited Oscoda to speak privately with residents, as has EGRLE Director Liesl Eichler Clark.

“The state recognizes that we’re going to make a fuss if we don’t get our ques-
tions answered,” Wusterbarth said.

HOW TO LEARN FROM HISTORY

By multiple accounts, the multi-

ple wins of the St. Louis group show that EPA in some cases is one of the largest and most-

eresting CAGs in America and its staying power has made it older than the world of environmental activism. As groups in Oscoda, Kent County and around the state dig into their own fights, St. Louis’ leaders warn them to buckle in for the long haul.

“One we started polling back the on-
ion, there were more layers and more lay-
ers,” Hall said. “The more you find, the more work you have to do.”

Hall and others said they’ve been suc-
cessful in part because they collaborate with universities and other institutions and cultivate relationships with politi-
cians on both sides of the aisle. But they retain their skepticism of officials’ prom-
ises for too many instances in which they prove regulators wrong, and they recommend new activists do the same.

“If there’s a lesson from PFAS, demand [regulators look into] everything you think could have happened, because it probably did,” Lorenz said. “You ought not tolerate this stuff.”

The group continues to plug away, but they’re also confronting their own mor-
tality and facing difficulties recruiting younger members to continue a fight that will outlast them.

That drags on Keen. But despite the certainty that St. Louis won’t be pristine any time soon, she and others see no rea-
son to give up the fight.

Koon and her former husband, Norm, both grew up in families that had lived in the St. Louis area since the 1850s. Neither swam in the Pine River growing up even when they were children in the 1960s, residents were suspicious of the notorious, fish-barren water.

Now, their great-grandchildren are still kept far from its shores. She hopes their great-great-grandchildren’s lives will be different.

“Norm’s dad used to be able to swim in the river in St. Louis, but nobody since in four generations,” Keen said. “There’s something wrong with that picture.”
Graphic photos vivid reminders of horror of PBB chemical crisis

RILEY BEGGIN | Bridge Magazine

Michigan’s biggest chemical disaster of the 20th century began with a small mistake.

Workers at Michigan Chemical Corp. in the mid-Michigan town of St. Louis confused bags of a magnesium oxide cattle feed supplement with bags of a flame retardant called polybrominated biphenyl (PBB), which the company produced and stored in nearly identical bags. The bags, marked as feed supplement but filled with PBB, went to a Farm Bureau feed center near Battle Creek where it was mixed into cattle feed and sent to farms around the state.

Soon, livestock statewide were succumbing to terrible illnesses: Tens of thousands of animals began dying, bearing offspring with gross deformities, losing their ability to walk straight and shaking uncontrollably.

But it was nearly a full year after the mixup before PBB was identified as the culprit. By then, nearly all living Michiganders — 9 million people — had consumed the chemical through meat or milk. It was later found to be linked to high levels of exposure to breast and liver cancer and kidney and thyroid problems.

Then-Gov. William Milliken initially listened to officials in the Department of Agriculture and other state agencies who were heavily influenced by agricultural industry interests. State officials didn’t notify the public until seven months after the problem was found and spent years more downplaying the scope of the problem. The federal government, deeming the crisis a Michigan problem, didn’t

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It took an entire year before scientists discovered PBB contamination had occurred and state officials spent years downplaying the gravity of the mistake. Eventually, lawmakers passed a law requiring the slaughter of at least 30,000 cattle, 1.5 million chickens and thousands of pigs and sheep. Many of them were buried in pits like this one in Oscoda and Kalkaska counties. — Michigan Archives, General Photograph Collection

Residents of Oscoda County were scarred by the mass poisoning, which had affected nine million Michiganders and been subject to years of contention over human health effects. So they were leery of state plans to bury the cattle in a nearby pit rather than incinerate them. They went to court, which ultimately contended the clay-lined pit would keep drinking water safe. — Michigan Archives, General Photograph Collection
Reminders of PBB chemical crisis

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As fears mounted and researchers studied the chemical’s effects, public pressure built for lawmakers to address the crisis. Milliken ultimately realized he’d been misled and by 1977 advocated for and signed legislation to limit the allowable amount of PBB in food supplies. Farms began quarantining livestock. Thousands were ordered to be executed en masse and deposited in gigantic graves in Kalkaska and later, in Mio in Oscoda County.

Eventually, legislation passed that would significantly limit allowed amounts of PBB and compensate farmers for their losses.

But the delays made it hard for many farmers to recover what they’d lost.

Over the course of a long-term health study, researchers have found that PBB has epigenetic consequences, meaning it can pass along harmful health effects from generation to generation. Many farm families exposed to high levels of PBB over the first few years of the crisis in the 1970s are still living with the consequences.
County Hears Riverdale Pitch for Support

Citizens Committee Lays Out Proposed Septic Resolution for Commissioners

By Rosemary Horvath
Herald Staff Writer

In an effort to accommodate a request from a Riverdale citizens committee that is seeking county support in the group’s ongoing dispute with the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy over private septic systems, Gratiot County Commissioners will forgo their regular meeting schedule for the month December.

Because of a conflict with the holidays and document deadlines, commissioners have elected to combine their bi-monthly assemblies of Dec. 3 and 17 and will gather just once on Tuesday, Dec. 10.

The Riverdale group hopes to include a county resolution at that meeting with a packet prepared by Saginaw engineers with Fleis & VanderBrink, whom Seville Township hired to recommend septic system possibilities for the village.

At the Nov. 19 county board meeting, Riverdale residents Bob Lombard and Mikie VanHorn, along with Seville Township Supervisor Tish Mallory, sought commission approval for a prepared resolution endorsing the upkeep of private septic systems versus a community sanitary system.

The latter will likely become an order from EGLE that residents of the Seville Township community would rather block.

This conflict arose in 2018 after monitoring results and field observations by EGLE and the Mid-Michigan District Health Department showed discharges of sewage into the Pine River and an adjacent tributary in the Riverdale area. EGLE has ordered the township to submit a long-term strategy to correct the issues.

A deadline date has been changed three times with the latest now being Dec. 15. Lombard said residents have learned how septic systems function “or don’t function,” and that “wrong” have been corrected. There had been an issue at the health department where permit records of installed septic or pumping had not been recorded. This too has been corrected.

VanHorn has dogged owners of non-functioning systems. Some have been replaced with permits for others pending.

“Everyone in Riverdale wants to stop the pollution,” she said.

Some parcels are on pump and haul contracts.

Supervisor Mallory said the community has worked with Michigan Rural Water Association to identify and repair problem septic connections, and with the county drain commissioner to clean out drains.

“We’re trying to get on top of this,” she said, adding that an old catch basin had been clogged with stagnant water which explained the high levels of E. coli bacteria from human waste tested in water samples. Because the drain has been cleared, the problem has been solved, she said.

Testing the water draining from the south end of the village is cleaner than the water coming into Riverdale, Mallory noted.

The proposed resolution carries a promise that property owners will practice due diligence and routinely maintain their private septic systems. And that every five to seven years septic tanks will be pumped. Volunteers will test water discharges from Riverdale annually.

The resolution also offers up the promise of a “Time of Sale” septic system inspection when a property changes ownership.

This has been a consistent stumbling block throughout Michigan mainly by realtors who question if the responsibility for repairs rests with the seller or the buyer.

The resolution does not state any penalties if promises are not kept.

Because the proposal was submitted only a day before the meeting, commissioners expressed concern there hadn’t been time for a fair consideration.

Commissioner Chuck Murphy whose District 1 includes Riverdale is on board with the resolution. He maintains the community does not need a sanitary sewer system. He is a member of the citizens committee.

However, Commissioner Sam Smith and board Chairman George Bailey recognized Gratiot County has other areas dealing with failing septic systems. They talked about the costs if USDA Rural Development would finance 75 percent of building a community system.

Commissioner Tim Landreth pointed out some property owners already have invested in new systems.

He proposed changing the date for the December meeting to give the county time to “rewrite the letter. We need to be careful about what we say.”

Chairman Bailey agreed. He went on to explain that currently, he chairs the health department’s Board of Health, composed of commissioners from Gratiot, Clinton, and Montcalm counties. Commissioner Murphy also sits on the board.

“We’ve directed our staff to be as neutral as possible,” he said of the health department. “What started in Riverdale was a complaint. That’s how it all started.”

Bailey recognized the committee members “have done an amazing job” identifying failing systems. “A lot of people don’t know they have septic systems in rural areas,” he said.

As the lengthy discussion continued, commissioners decided to rewrite a letter to include in the Dec. 15 engineering analysis and to hold the next regular meeting on Dec. 10.
The opioid crisis and how townships can respond

The swearing in ceremony can be a landmark moment for new firefighters, with family, friends, fellow first responders and local officials gathered to honor the heroes and recognize their achievement.

“There’s a feeling that you made it,” said Ken Verkest, supervisor of Harrison Charter Township (Macomb Co.). “It’s ceremonial, there is a level of pride that comes with it. It’s a big deal for a firefighter.”

One recent ceremony at Harrison Charter Township didn’t go quite as planned. Scheduled to begin at 8:30 a.m., when the guests began to arrive, they realized that the first responders were out on a call. When the responders finally returned to the station, the audience was told that the run was to help someone overdosing on opioids—the same individual they had helped less than 24 hours earlier.

“Man, I’ve been here twice in less than 24 hours. What’s the likelihood that I’m not going to get a call again because this guy’s gonna be dead?”

A nationwide epidemic with Michigan impacts
As explained by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the opioid epidemic began in the late 1990s, when pharmaceutical companies told the medical community that...
patients could not become addicted to prescription opioids. This led to the narcotics being prescribed and used at a greater rate. In time, this grew to misuse and dependence, and medical professionals began to see firsthand how addictive these medications truly are. Today, the widespread crisis involves both heroin, which is now commonly laced with additives like fentanyl, as well as prescription medications, such as Vicodin or OxyContin.

Opioid abuse is a nationwide epidemic that is hitting home in the Great Lakes State, and likely impacts every Michigan community. In 2017, of 2,739 deaths related to drug overdoses in Michigan, nearly 71 percent—1,941—were related to opioids. This is an increase of 17 times since 1999, when the state had just 99 total drug-related deaths. The correlation to opioids is unmistakable.

Along with efforts at the federal level, both former Gov. Rick Snyder and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer have also focused attentions on the crisis. In 2016, Snyder created a prescription drug and opioid abuse commission, and the state launched a new web resource last year, www.michigan.gov/opioids/, providing information about opioid addiction—from data about the epidemic, where those suffering from addiction can get help, and information for health care professionals—in one location.

Just prior to Township Focus press time, Whitmer announced an awareness campaign, with aspirations to reduce the number of opioid-related deaths by 50 percent over the next five years. This campaign follows the governor’s August executive order creating the Michigan Opioid Task Force, which aims to identify the root causes of the epidemic, raise public awareness and implement actions to help Michiganders struggling with addiction access the recovery services they need.

This epidemic is devastating to its victims and their families. It also has ripple effects, tearing at the fabric of the community, stretching thin public services and health systems, and impacting the economy. Substance abuse can result in myriad issues, including increased crime and violence, car accidents, homelessness, unemployment, and more.

“Opioids and heroin abuse impact every community, and it feels like everyone you run into has been personally impacted or affected,” said Pat Williams, supervisor of Canton Charter Township (Wayne Co.). “It goes beyond the state of Michigan. It is a national problem.

“We are making runs for public safety, on average, twice a week responding to overdose calls,” he continued. “Last year, I believe, the number is nine souls that we lost. It is significant.”

The statistics and stories may seem bleak, but townships can play a role in helping to combat this epidemic—through education, information and partnership—offering hope to those in need.

Opioid epidemic hits home

No corner of Michigan has gone untouched by the opioid crisis—and township officials across the state say their communities are struggling with the issue.

The spring 2019 Michigan Public Policy Survey, conducted by the University of Michigan’s Center for Local, State and Urban Policy, asked local officials statewide—including township supervisors, clerks and managers—about opioids in communities, and their impacts. The survey results showed that 87 percent of township officials felt that there were at least some problems with opioids in their communities—with 19 percent calling the problems “significant.” And the issue doesn’t discriminate based on the size of the jurisdiction—anywhere from 60 to a full 92 percent of communities in populations from less than 1,500 to more than 30,000 all said that they are experiencing problems associated with opioids.

The results also showed that no region of the state is untouched. Some 87 percent of township officials in the Upper Peninsula said that there were problems associated with opioids in their community—and of those, 26 percent said it was a significant issue. Similar responses were reported throughout the Lower Peninsula. For example, in Southeast Michigan, 91 percent say there are problems, and 26 percent say these problems are significant.

Township officials—especially those in smaller communities—expressed concerns that the problem was not being addressed. In townships overall, only 8 percent of respondents say their own jurisdiction is taking steps to address opioid issues. Some 55 percent of townships felt the issues were being addressed at the county level—which is 10 percent higher than the 40 percent of township respondents who felt like the state was addressing the issues.

Programs like Hope Not Handcuffs bring together local law enforcement and community organizations to find viable treatment options for individuals seeking help to reduce dependency on heroin and prescription drugs, as well as alcohol.
The survey also reaffirmed the impact on local services, with 76 percent of township respondents saying that opioids are an additional burden on local law enforcement services (25 percent called it a “significant” additional burden). Identical numbers were reported for the impact on emergency medical services as well.

Rural areas hit hard

The impact of the opioid epidemic on small towns and rural places has been particularly significant. A December 2017 study by the National Farmers Union and the American Farm Bureau Federation said that almost 74 percent of farmers surveyed have been directly impacted by the opioid epidemic. That year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also announced that the rates of drug overdose deaths are rising in rural areas, surpassing rates in urban areas.

Rural areas face unique challenges in dealing with the substance abuse crisis, including a lack of or limited mental and behavioral health care and rehabilitation facilities, decreased access to primary care and specialty providers, emergency services that may be spread over larger geographic areas, and limited resources among hospitals or emergency rooms.

“I cover extremely rural areas,” said Dr. Jennifer Morse, medical director of three regional health departments, covering 19 rural counties in mid- and central Michigan. “This is a huge issue we deal with. Even when people have gone through a recovery program, they come back home, they have nowhere else to live, the only support people they have are their friends they used drugs with, and it’s really hard for them not to relapse. They have nowhere else to go. That is one thing that is really hard in small, rural areas.”

According to the state Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs Michigan Automated Prescription System, from 2012–2017, more than 7.5 million patients in Michigan received more than 103 million opioid prescriptions—which were linked to 5,261 overdose deaths. CDC records indicate the state of Michigan is listed at 74.2 prescriptions per 100 people—and among the counties with the highest rates were in the central and northern part of the state.

Roscommon County has been hit particularly hard by the opioid crisis. In a recent survey, the county ranked 25th in the nation for most opioid prescriptions filled. More opioids have been dispensed in Roscommon County than anywhere else in Michigan, enough for 443 pills per person.

Gerrish Township (Roscommon Co.) Police Chief Brian Hill, who has been with the department for more than 37 years, says that he has witnessed changes in his area. Over the course of the past several years, he noticed a gradual change in his community, including an uptick in things like domestic violence, drunk—and drugged—driving, and an increase in calls related to mental health and suicides. The township decided to take action.

“We’re not unlike any other community,” said Hill, noting that the township hosted a round table discussion on the opioid epidemic last year with U.S. Sen. Gary Peters (D-MI) and local first responders, health care providers and community partners. “But we do try to be proactive in our approaches to this crisis. You can’t put a band-aid on a crisis.

“There are good folks, from across all spectrums of life,” he said of the people who are battling with substance abuse addiction. “There is a lot of work to do. But we have to attack it proactively to reduce the numbers. Let’s go after it.”

The impact of the epidemic on rural communities is so stark that last year, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched a program to help these areas address the crisis. Included in the USDA efforts are funding opportunities for mobile treatment clinics, temporary residential facilities, halfway houses, treatment clinics and others. They also offer funding for workforce development to help those who have overcome their addiction move forward.

This is not a battle that townships have to tackle on their own. Morse notes that partnering is critical in these efforts. Officials can reach out to their neighboring municipalities and county, area health care facilities, local service organizations and churches to work together to ensure proper education and information about the issues, support for addicts and their families, as well as to help secure funding for programs—all of which can make a difference, no matter how big or small your township.

“You can’t do it by yourself,” Hill echoed. “You just can’t. You have to reach out to partners. We can make a difference, but we have to think globally to make a difference locally.”

One such social service organization that is endeavoring to make strides against addiction is Families Against Narcotics (www.familiesagainstnarcotics.org). What began in Macomb County in 2007 has expanded across the state, with 22 chapters in counties from southeast Michigan to the Thumb, throughout northern Michigan and into the Upper Peninsula. The community-based program assists those seeking recovery, those in recovery, family members affected by addiction, and community supporters. Townships, or regional partners, can reach out to Families Against Narcotics (FAN) as they seek to change the face of addiction, dispel the stigma of addiction, and educate the community as well as those affected by addiction.

Funding is also a major issue for any efforts to help curb this epidemic, and federal, state and other grants—including from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (www.samhsa.gov)—are available. Morse also recommends that townships connect with the county to ensure any and all available funding is being used to its fullest potential. “Liquor tax money, which is earmarked for anything drug related, is often not utilized,”
she said. “I encourage townships and counties to really look at that, and if they do have unspent liquor tax money, they can work with community partners and use it toward drug prevention or drug treatment. That money might just be sitting there—not being used for what it’s meant to be used for.”

The difference between life and death
One critically important way that townships can help to reduce the number of opioid deaths in their area is by equipping their local law enforcement and first responders—and even other municipal employees—with the opioid antagonist naloxone. Injected or administered nasally, the life-saver—more commonly known by its brand names Narcan or Evzio—blocks the effects of the opioids and can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose in progress.

Hill is one of Gerrish Township’s trainers to educate officers in the use of naloxone—and what to look for when suspecting an overdose. “We carry naloxone in all of the department’s police cruisers, I can tell you that,” Hill said, noting that the department receives the antagonists through an area social service organization. During the training, officers watch a PowerPoint presentation about the effects of naloxone in intercepting the opioid signal in the brain.

“Since naloxone only works on breaking that connection, we focus on signs and symptoms as to whether or not Narcan would be a proper response for a person having an opioid crisis,” said Hill, who also said that the township’s “fantastic” ambulance service arrives on scenes so quickly EMS personnel are often the ones administering the Narcan, rather than the police officers.

Since 2017, all police personnel on the road in Van Buren Charter Township (Wayne Co.) have been trained in the use of naloxone. The department training was provided by the county department of mental health, which also supplied the naloxone kits.

“Like so many other departments, it’s a step we’ve taken to help with the opioid crisis,” said Gregory Laurain, director of the Van Buren Township Police Safety Department. “It is a community crisis, no doubt about it. It’s all over the place.”

In September, Van Buren police hosted an opioid forum where it was noted that, over the course of nine months, officers used Narcan to counteract more than 20 opioid overdoses.

State laws to increase access to and use of naloxone began in 2014 with legislation amending the Good Samaritan law, creating protections for those hoping to save a life, as well as laws requiring that emergency vehicles carry opioid antagonists and EMS personnel to be trained in administering the life-saving drug.

Laws to enhance access to naloxone have continued since 2014. In 2016, Michigan passed a naloxone “standing order” law, allowing a pharmacist to dispense naloxone without an individual prescription and without identifying a particular patient. The Good Samaritan Law was also amended to prevent drug possession charges against those who seek medical assistance for themselves or others in the event of an overdose. And this summer, Gov. Whitmer signed
into law a package of bills creating the “Administration of Opioid Antagonists Act,” which makes it easier for municipal employees to administer naloxone. Now, it’s not just first responders and law enforcement who can save a life. A properly trained municipal employee could use the opioid antagonist if they believed someone was experiencing an opioid overdose. (It is important to note that employees who act in good faith are exempt from any liability if their conduct doesn’t amount to gross negligence.)

**Rescue and recovery**

Williams has seen first-hand in his own community the impact that opioid addiction can have. He knows that helping opioid abusers access treatment can make all the difference. That’s why Canton Charter Township—along with neighboring Plymouth Charter and Northville Townships (Wayne Co.)—are the lead communities in creating a “rescue recovery program” to help those battling addiction in their communities. Rescue recovery programs give addicts an opportunity to seek help, rather than end up behind bars.

The Conference of Western Wayne Rescue Recovery program, which started last fall and also includes two cities as its partners, is a pilot program that attempts to break the common cycle with addicts of detoxing in jail—rather than with proper treatment—which frequently results in the person using drugs again when they are released. Through a partnership with regional social support group Growth Works and an area hospital, as well as the townships’ public safety departments, a network has formed.

Now, “when an addict is encountered, it gives them the option of treatment versus jail,” said Williams.

Gerrish Township also works closely with a nonprofit, Neighbors on Watch, which reaches out to residents in need to ensure that they have ongoing support, as well as the basic essentials. “We are so blessed within our community to have this organization,” Hill said. “We work with them every single day. It shows the compassionate side of addressing issues in the community.”

Nine townships are also part of a statewide program, created by Families Against Narcotics, called Hope Not Handcuffs. The program is aimed at bringing local law enforcement and community organizations together to find viable treatment options for individuals seeking help to reduce dependency with heroin and prescription drugs, as well as alcohol.

Under the program, an individual suffering with addiction can go to a participating police agency and ask for the help. From there, Hope Not Handcuffs helps the person get into treatment as soon as possible, regardless of if they have health insurance. Since the program began in 2017, more than 3,500 individuals have taken part—and received hope. Among the townships participating in the program are Clinton Charter Township (Macomb Co.), Waterford Charter Township (Oakland Co.), White Lake Charter Township (Oakland Co.), Argentine Township (Genesee Co.), Genesee Charter Township (Genesee Co.), Grand Blanc Charter Township (Genesee Co.), Montrose Township (Genesee Co.), and Saginaw Charter Township (Saginaw Co.), with Huron Charter Township (Wayne Co.) coming on board soon. In addition, the Macomb County Sheriff’s Office—which serves Harrison Charter, Macomb, Lenox and Washington Charter Townships—also participates.

Townships can reach out to their local Families Against Narcotics chapter if they would like to consider starting a similar program in their own area. More information can also be obtained by calling Hope Not Handcuffs at (833) 202-HOPE.

The Michigan State Police’s (MSP) Angel Program also allows someone struggling with opioids to walk into any state police post during business hours and ask for help. They will then be transported to a treatment facility. In addition to participating in MSP’s Angel Program, Gerrish Township also works directly with a nationwide, faith-based community program called “Lion’s Den” to help area residents battling addiction.

“It’s all voluntary,” Hill noted. “The person does have to want to get off the addiction themselves. It’s successful—I’ve seen it. It’s a great opportunity and a great thing for our community.”

Williams echoes how each of these rescue recovery programs can make a positive difference. He too has seen it first-hand in his own community with Help Not Handcuffs. “Some 86 percent of those engaged wanted treatment, which is a good thing,” he said. “Once they are detoxed, there is the next level of counseling and support that goes on perpetually until the individual is fully recovered.”
Drop off and take back

While opioids do have a role in medical care, preventing them from falling into the wrong hands is critical, according to Morse.

One solution is offering residents the opportunity to drop off unwanted or unneeded opioids, and other medication, for proper disposal. Gerrish Township has had its drop-box for medications for more than 16 years. Originally funded by a community group more than a decade ago, the drop-box sits outside the police department and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The township also just received a new drop-box from the Rite Aid KidsCents Foundation.

“The community loves it and we love to have it for them,” said Hill, noting that because his township is by Higgins Lake, he also had concerns that drugs would be disposed of improperly and end up in the watershed, which is another reason the drop-box is valuable to the community. The dropped-off drugs are collected every six months and incinerated.

Van Buren Charter Township also offers a “drug drop-off” in the lobby of its police station. “We started this earlier this year,” Laurain explained. He sees the box as an opportunity for people to dispose of the unneeded drugs in the time between the Take Back events they host with federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) (discussed below).

“We try to make it convenient for residents,” he said. “The receptacle is available, basically around the clock. Even if it is after hours, as long as they see the front desk first, they can dispose of the items.”

The program is in partnership with the Detroit Wayne Mental Health Authority, which supplied the box. When the drugs are dropped off, they are logged into their property room. The department also works with a company that collects the pills on a quarterly basis. The drugs are then burned and destroyed.

The township has seen a positive reaction to the drop box in the short time they have had it available, and Laurain encourages other townships to explore offering a similar service. “What a way to help give back to your community if you have a way to get rid of these drugs,” he said.

Even if a township does not have its own drop-off program, it can promote others in the area. “I believe all of the state police posts have permanent stations,” Morse said. “A lot of other local police and sheriff’s departments will have them as well. Townships can help just by being aware of when they are available and helping law enforcement advertise their availability. And if you don’t have one in your community, encourage law enforcement to have it available.”

In addition to drop boxes, townships can also help to organize or take part in “Take Back” community events, which are an opportunity for participants to dispose of any unneeded medications, including opioids.

“This is a big effort in law enforcement,” Laurain said, noting his township’s quarterly partnership with the DEA’s National Prescription Drug Take Back Days. Once the township responds to the DEA whether is wishes to participate that quarter, the federal agency sends boxes for collection, and the township promotes the event on its Facebook page and website. During a four-hour window, residents from the township and neighboring areas enter the police station discarding their unwanted prescription drugs into the boxes supplied by DEA.

During the DEA’s October Take Back Day, 208 different Michigan law enforcement agencies participated in 262 collections—making it the fourth highest participation in the nation. Over the course of this one day this fall, a total of 27,856 pounds in prescription drugs were collected in Michigan. The DEA has hosted 18 Take Back events in all, collecting 272,931 pounds of prescriptions in Michigan alone. Townships that wish to join the DEA’s Take Back events can visit www.dea.gov and register online.

Education and communication efforts

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services has a three-tiered approach to combat the epidemic across the state. Many options, including access to treatment, use of naloxone, and take back events, are considered “secondary prevention”—help or assistance after someone is using or has used opioids.

There is another component as well: primary prevention, or efforts to prevent the abuse from beginning in the first place.

“This is a disease, and we need to come at it from a
different angle,” Hill said. “It is a matter of trying to intervene before we need things like Narcan.”

Strong social support systems, changes in how opioids are prescribed, and education are key components. In fact, this year, Public Act 255 of 2017 began supporting a prescription opioid drug abuse education curriculum in schools starting during the fall semester.

Talking with students, explaining the risks, and what addiction looks like is one way that communities can get involved. Williams sees efforts like that occurring in his own local schools. He said he speaks regularly with his school superintendent, and together, they discuss issues that are significant and important to his community and school district.

“Our regional social service network, Growth Works, works not only with adults in our community, but also all the student-aged groups,” he said, noting that the educational presentations combine videos, subject-matter experts, speakers and questions-and-answers periods.

Information can also be shared through your township newsletter, website, at board meetings, or posted in the township hall or public areas. For Hill, educating the public on the epidemic is an everyday thing.

“It’s constant for me, as chief of police, to make sure I am informing the public,” he said. “For me, and our officers, this is whenever we are out and about.” It goes beyond simply reminding residents of the township’s drop-box or other community programs. “It’s also, ‘Hey, listen, you need to pay attention to what’s around you,’” Hill said. “A lot of it is partnering—having meetings, sharing information and resources. That’s the biggest issue.”

Williams concurs that face-to-face conversations keep the issue at the forefront. “When I attend an event, such as the chamber of commerce and other community groups, or have programs, like the State of the Township address, I share what we are doing,” he said. “So, the word is out there.”

Even talking with peers can help keep the issue at the forefront. “When the leaders of different municipalities come together, we are all sharing ideas and trying to figure out how to solve issues in our own communities,” said Williams. “This happens to be one issue, but it is a significant one.”

Supporting local efforts

Townships can even play a role simply by working with and offering support to social service organizations.

The Wayne County chapter of Families Against Narcotics holds its monthly meetings at Canton Charter Township’s Summit on the Park facility. “They do a lot of publicity and different programs in the region, where they reach out again not just to the families of those who are using but also to the users themselves,” Williams said.

Morse also praised the outreach done these substance abuse service organizations—some of which are started by local officials themselves, and all of which make a difference in their community. “More and more communities are getting these types of organizations,” she said. “Some are started by family members, some are started by county or township officials or other community members. Getting more and more communities to start those kinds of programs can help encourage and continue involvement by the community to keep the community drug-free.”

Townships could consider reaching out to similar organizations in their regions—offer to help publicize information, share details about meeting space, or just have contact information available for police and emergency services personnel to share. If a township doesn’t have organizations helping families or people suffering with addictions in their region, consider investigating USDA grants and other funding opportunities or maybe even reaching out to other local partners to see if there is something you can do together to help your residents who need an extra hand.

Seeing hope, finding solutions

While Verkest saw firsthand what his local first responders deal with around opioids that morning of the swearing in ceremony, he also sees hope in other places.

“Our District Court 41B has an excellent drug/sobriety court,” he said. The community corrections program combines efforts of the judiciary, community and treatment providers to create a safe and addiction-free society. Recalling ceremonies where not just family and friends, but also law enforcement and staff from the court system attend to support the program participants, Verkest said, “You can’t go through a graduation ceremony without being teary-eyed. There is also incentive for those still going through the program to say, ‘I want to be there someday.’ ”

In time, with assistance and support from local communities, more Michigan residents suffering under opioid addiction can truly find that hope for a better day.

“If we could all work together to destigmatize and bring it to the light of day, then we can also work together to find a solution,” said Williams.

Scott Southard, MTA Staff Writer, and Jenn Fiedler, MTA Communications Director
Health department joins Wear One campaign

Submitted by the Mid-Michigan District Health Department

The Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD) is teaming up with the statewide Wear One campaign to increase free condom availability, create awareness, and promote acceptance of condom use in individuals ages 18 to 24.

Originally launched by the Ottawa County Department of Health in 2014, the program aims to decrease rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancies and create a consistent, positive sexual health message by removing barriers like cost, embarrassment and lack of access.

The MMDHD is partnering with area businesses to provide Wear One packets in locations where young people shop, eat, and receive services. Current Wear One locations include Highland Blush in Alma, Alma Brewing Co., the Eagles Nest in Carson City, the Montcalm Area Health Center in Greenville, and MMDHD offices in St. Johns, Ithaca and Stanton.

Male condoms are one of the most popular forms of birth control, with an effective rate of over 95% when used correctly and consistently. They protect against STI’s and don’t require a prescription. Each Wear One bag includes 10 condoms, lubricant, and information on MMDHD family planning services, participating locations, and proper condom use.

For more information on the Wear One campaign, contact Cheryl Thelen, Health Educator, at (989) 831-3634 or visit mmdhd.org/clinic/fam. Information on the statewide Wear One campaign can be found at miottawa.org/ewearone online.

The MMDHD serves the residents of Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm counties.