

MY TURN | An investment in your septic system

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By Eric Evans, Kitsap Public Health District

Want to talk about your septic system? Most people don't. In fact many people don't even think about their septic system (also called an on-site sewage system) until they have a problem. However, not taking care of this important utility can be costly for homeowners — and our shorelines!

This week is SepticSmart week — a week during which the Kitsap Public Health District joins the Environmental Protection Agency in reminding homeowners and communities about the importance of caring for and maintaining their septic systems.

We live in such a unique and beautiful county with more than 250 miles of fresh and saltwater shoreline. While rural, Kitsap County also has more than a quarter of a million residents — and approximately 58,000 septic systems. Most of the county depends on groundwater for drinking water, and septic systems are a major utility that impacts groundwater!

For homeowners, failure to maintain a septic system can lead to backups and overflows, which can result in costly repairs and decreased property values. Septic systems that are poorly sited, designed, installed, operated or maintained can cause health and water quality problems including contamination of surface waters, ground water, shellfish beds and swimming beaches.

We encourage homeowners to think about their septic system not only as an investment (which it is!), but as an important part of their home that needs regular maintenance — like a furnace or a roof. Don't wait until it isn't working to give your septic system the attention it deserves. Maintenance can prevent expensive malfunctions and save you thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars. Here are a few helpful reminders for taking care of your septic system:

Protect it and inspect it: Homeowners should generally have their system inspected every three years by a licensed contractor. Tanks should be pumped when necessary, typically every three to five years.

Think at the sink: Avoid pouring fats, grease and solids down the drain. These substances can clog a system's pipes and drainfield.

Don't overload the commode: Only put things in the drain or toilet that belong there. For example, coffee grounds, dental floss, disposable diapers and wipes, feminine hygiene products, cigarette butts and cat litter can all clog and potentially damage septic systems.

Don't strain your drain: Be water efficient and spread out water use. Fix plumbing leaks and install faucet aerators and water-efficient products. Spread out laundry and dishwasher loads throughout the day — too much water at once can overload a system that hasn't been pumped recently.

Shield your field: Remind guests not to park or drive on a system's drainfield, where the vehicle's weight could damage buried pipes or disrupt underground flow.

Our staff work year-round reviewing septic designs, issuing permits, certifying contractors and overseeing required septic inspections and maintenance. We've got resources on our website, including a list of certified contractors, and our very popular "Homeowners Guide to On-site Sewage systems" — a document no septic system owner should be without. Printed copies of this guide are also available.

We invite you to join us for one of the free upcoming "Septic Sense" workshops — Oct. 6 in Poulsbo and Oct. 27 in Port Orchard. Both are from 6-8 p.m. These free workshops are an opportunity to learn about septic maintenance, ask questions, get technical assistance and information on a low-interest loan program for septic system repairs, and pick up some free "green" cleaning supplies that are better for your septic system than harsh chemicals. Space is limited so please visit our website for more information and a link to sign-up.

If you have questions don't hesitate to give us a call at 360-337-5235, or visit www.kitsappublichealth.org (<http://www.kitsappublichealth.org>) or www.epa.gov/ (<http://www.epa.gov/septicSMART>)septicSMART.

To sign up for tips on maintaining your septic system or other topics such as shellfish harvesting or swimming beach updates, visit www.kitsappublichealth.org/subscribe.

Eric Evans manages Kitsap Public Health District's Drinking Water and On-site Sewage Systems program.

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