



Solving The Septic Dilemma for Safe Water

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In Ontario, the oversight of onsite sewage systems that allow rural property owners to safely treat and dispose of human waste rests with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The ministry has delegated the responsibility to local bodies, such as municipalities, boards of health or conservation authorities. Here in Peterborough, with the exception of the Township of **North Kawartha**, this oversight sits with Peterborough Public Health. PPH operates a cost-recovery Safe Sewage program, meaning that we charge a fee to the property owner for this work and use these fees to pay for the program. If the revenues are greater than expenses for any given year, they are saved in a reserve that is used to offset any unforeseen additional costs, like legal fees. (And in case you didn't know, I can assure you that the installation and maintenance of septic systems can be a very contentious issue between neighbours!)

We can thank Walkerton for the strengthened legislation and regulations that have made oversight of our municipal water systems so much more robust, especially if there is a breach or a spill. This isn't the case for everyone.

When we take a big step away from the day to day work of assisting rural residents in addressing their sanitation issues, and look at the bigger picture of environmental and watershed protection, which includes ensuring that we all have access to clean and safe water, I am afraid that the rural parts of our public health jurisdiction lack the same level of safeguards and protection.

Our provincial cottage association, the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations (FOCA) and the Ontario Onsite Wastewater Association (OOWA) advocated, in 2018, that the oversight of onsite septic systems be added to the mandate of our Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks. It makes sense for a number of reasons.

First of all, there is insufficient protection of the natural environment currently. According to a joint submission to the province in 2018 from FOCA and OOWA, "an estimated 1.4 million households use onsite or decentralized wastewater systems in Ontario" and "approximately 10-20% of these systems experience malfunc-

tions every year". It goes on to say "70% of systems are failing between 7 to 15 years; 55% of these failures are related to poor maintenance and management".

Secondly, property owners currently bear both the responsibility and the costs and would benefit from support from the province to ensure compliance. We need to make it easier for property owners, who may lack the knowledge and the resources to ensure their systems are working. The natural life of a septic system ranges between 25 to 40 years. Like humans, they are not meant to live forever. Besides a mandatory re-inspection for properties that are situated in environmentally sensitive areas, the routine re-inspection of onsite septic systems is up to municipalities to organize and deliver. Of our Peterborough townships, only Trent Lakes currently has taken this on. Plans by Selwyn and Douro-Dummer township councils to follow suit last year were met with a backlash from some property owners due to the additional costs they would have generated for home owners.

The Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks currently governs wastewater treatment systems operated by municipalities. We could all benefit from the creation and maintenance of a central database and registry of all onsite septic systems that would allow for better monitoring and remediation when necessary. In 2012, the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario urged the province to expand its septic re-inspection program. Both FOCA and OOWA agreed, but have been calling for more.

The current lack of provincial stewardship for onsite septic systems lacks the checks and balances that we all recognize as being important elements of watershed protection and the protection of human health. Creating a system can't be done by municipalities and home-owners alone. It requires provincial attention and resources. Resources that include grants and loan programs to assist those home-owners that are burdened with the cost of remediating or replacing a failing septic system. It's all part of a strong and sustainable approach environmental stewardship so we all share and enjoy the beautiful natural world that surrounds us.

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