

Henderson Septic O&M Proposal Open House – July 7, 2005 Summary of Public Comments and Questions

The Open House was held July 7, 2005 from 6:30 – 8:30. Approximately 100 people were in attendance. Listening Posts were set up for the following:

- In or Out of the Program Area
- High Risk or Low Risk System
- Financing
- Water Quality
- Current O&M program
- How septic systems work

Sherri McDonald, director of the Public Health and Social Services Department, served as moderator for the evening. Tris Carlson, member of the advisory committee, presented a summary of the proposal and revisions made since the November open house. An hour of question and answers followed. The following is a compilation of those questions and answers:

Note: Comments are distilled, not verbatim. Since this was an informational meeting, not a public hearing, comments were not recorded. Notes were taken on the main points and questions that people made or provided.

1) *Does any of the money collected go towards active restoration in the inlet or is it all for program administration?*

The costs are operational costs. Things such as tracking system records, data base management, educational workshops, and system evaluations are paid for by the proposed fees. Fees will cover the county's responsibilities for this program.

2) *What determines high or low risk?*

There is a matrix in the back of the room that shows the high and low risk factors. Factors such as: on a stream or waterfront or a conduit for water to be carried directly to inlet, type of system, age of system, and soils are built into the matrix. It is not an arbitrary determination.

Then the question was asked, "*Is it a decision that the county is making?*" to which was answered, the stakeholders recommended those factors.

3) *Why are the Woodland Creek headwaters being excluded?*

The time that it would take for water to move through the series of lakes and get to Woodland Creek wouldn't allow bacteria to survive.

4) *My well is only 100 feet from my septic system so why should I be concerned about Henderson Inlet that is miles away from my septic system?*

Matrix is based on two basic premises: how readily, if the system fails, can that sewage get into the water and Henderson Inlet, and what is the soil type (does water run over the surface and soak down into the ground).

The 100-foot regulation set back from a well is based on protection of groundwater, which flows differently than surface water and has layers of soil to penetrate before reaching the ground water. Often there is a protective layer, such as hardpan, that prevents contaminants from the surface from reaching the ground water. If you have a shallow well, it is recommended to have it tested regularly.

- 5) *This doesn't look like the most efficient way to deal with this. Has an outside consultant been brought in to see if this is the most responsible way to deal with the issue from a financial standpoint? Asking people to pay an extra tax (call it what you like, it's a septic tax.) can put future levies and school bonds at risk.*

We have been working on this for over three years. We've brought in other counties that have dealt with similar issues, Department of Ecology and State DOH for advice. There is no such thing as a disinterested individual and the only specific interest of the stakeholder group is to make sure that water quality is protected and shellfish are clean.

- 6) *I am in a no-risk, low-risk area. If I have a failure of my system, no pollution will get into Henderson Inlet. If people that are in no-risk areas did not have to pay a fee, could the program continue?*

The program budget is based on the current formula. If the formula changes and low-risk systems do not pay, high-risk systems would have to pay more.

- 7) *EH states that there are 6500 residential and commercial septic systems in the Henderson Watershed. Annual revenue from this program would be over \$250,000. How will that money be spent?*

There is a detailed budget estimate that can be provided.

- 8) *Is the O&M certificate renewed at the transfer of property?*

The certificate would go with the property, not the property owners.

- 9) *What is the purpose and value of the time interval between now and the public hearing date of September 27?*

There are two more advisory committee meetings before recommendations are official. The time gives us the chance to answer questions and address issues before recommendations go forward.

- 10) *I have a system that is currently required to have an O&M certificate and am in a high-risk area. Will I have double requirements?*

There is currently in place a countywide O&M program for certain types and sizes of systems. If your system is required to have an O&M certificate now, if this program is adopted, the requirements in this program would take affect. There would not be double requirements.

- 11) *It appears that this is nothing more than an increase in county budget. It will not benefit the property owner or clean up the inlet. There are three people in my household and my neighbor has seven. Why isn't he paying more than me?*

If your neighbor maintains his systems properly than there is no added risk with the extra people. Where he will have to pay more is in the frequency of his pumping schedule.

12) What is the worst-case scenario if system is failing?

The county would have the obligation to insure that a failing system is repaired. This could be an extensive and expensive repair or often, an inexpensive maintenance fix. It could go as high as a complete system replacement. There are loans that the county can provide. It can cost approximately \$5,000 -15,000 to correct a failing system or more depending on the site.

13) Has anyone thought of an initial inspection to determine if system really has to be in this program?

Work group who helped to develop this program discussed a variety of options. It was concluded that this proposal is the best option for this watershed.

14) Why isn't the entire Henderson Watershed in this program?

It was decided to focus this program on the fecal contamination that is responsible for the shellfish harvesting downgrades. The advisory committee felt that the contribution from septic systems should be the first priority, so we are focusing on septic systems that impact the inlet. Other options were to focus only on waterfront properties or to encompass the entire watershed. After reviewing studies and available information, it was determined that septic systems in the lakes area are not likely to be direct contributors. This proposal will provide a means for people to provide additional information if you think that your property is not within the Henderson Inlet program area. We are trying to include properties that are contributing pollution to the inlet. The community needs to work together to solve this issue. If someone has ideas for other ways to pay for an effective program we are interested in discussing it.

15) What does the money collected pay for?

The program area would include approximately 6,500 septic systems that would be required to document that routine maintenance and inspection of the system were being done. The county fee covers the following:

- Maintain an accurate list of the properties within the program and the risk category assigned to each property. Updated annually;
- Track, receive, review and manage the septic system inspection and maintenance documentation for 6500 systems;
- Mail certificate renewal notices and certificates after renewal requirements are met;
- Perform quality assurance inspections of 10 percent of the low-risk system inspections;
- Conduct high-risk system dye-trace evaluations and over-see high-risk system evaluations conducted by certified private contractors.
- Prepare and mail an annual newsletter
- Conduct septic system education workshops, and certification programs for professional, and possibly homeowners;
- Program compliance activities;
- On-going program development, evaluation, and improvement.
- Develop and manage financial incentive and assistance programs that may be adopted.

16) *Since septic systems are creating problems in the inlet, has the county stopped issuing permits?*

Permits are still being issued within the watershed. Properly designed and sited systems that are properly maintained are not causing the problem.

17) *If this proposal is enacted then loan underwriters will require health letters making housing even less affordable.*

Actually, the trend is that health letters are being asked for less than they used to be. The health department has gone from about 1200 health letter applications per year to maybe 400 this year.

18) *Are there alternatives to septic and sewer systems?*

There are technologies that are available to deal with sewage but not the other water sources. A composting or incinerating toilet would still need a gray water management system in place.

19) *How long would it take for inspectors to get to MY house?*

It will take three years to implement the program. Quality control inspections by county staff would happen on only 10% of low-risk systems, so they may never reach YOUR house. High-risk systems will have a dye trace every 6 years. The program allows for either county staff or a certified professional to do the dye test.

20) *Proposed sunset clause is ten years to determine if program is working. The City of Lacey dumps their untreated stormwater into the Woodland Creek. They will be building a stormwater filter system. If the inlet recovers because of this change of stormwater practice, why would we need to keep paying a fee for the septic program if it's no longer needed?*

Ten years was figured based on the complete testing cycle. This proposal would be in effect to address the problem of human waste in the inlet. There are many sources of pollution contributing to the overall problem in Henderson creeks and inlet. Stormwater is definitely one of those sources being addressed by the cities and county. But it will take reductions in all of the pollution sources in order to achieve water quality standards in the creeks and inlet. A DNA-typing study has shown that human waste is part of the pollution picture. Failing septic systems are one of the ways human sewage gets into the water.

21) *If your budget were cut in half, how would you deal with this issue?*

Right now, the county's water quality work is funded by grants. Grants are short-term funds, and their availability is decreasing. Grants cannot pay for on-going programs, and they cannot be used to fund the same type of activity if that activity was done in the past.