

Septic systems gone wild

By LOUISE WREGG - HP Staff | Posted: Sunday, April 24, 2016 6:00 am

A big problem in tracking pollution to failing septic systems is Michigan has no state laws to regulate them.

“Michigan is the only state in the country that doesn’t have a state sanitary code,” said Marcy Hamilton, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission. “Really, it’s left up to each county health department to create their own.”

She said without a sanitary code, county residents can’t get grant money to help fix their failing septic systems. Nationwide, she said it is estimated that 40 percent of septic systems are failing. She said they can cost \$5,000 to \$15,000 to fix.

“That’s a lot of money if you’re living on a fixed income,” she said.

Berrien County Commissioner Andy Vavra said he was member of the county’s Well and Septic Maintenance Committee that met for several months until discussions were put on hold in 2012. He said members included several real estate agents, environmental consultants and health department employees.

At the time, he said, state officials were considering implementing their own plan to regulate septic systems statewide. He said a common way to do that is to require that septic systems be inspected when the property they are on is sold.

“It’s not a perfect solution, but it’s a start,” said Hamilton, who was also on the committee. “Whenever a home that has a septic (system) is transferred or sold, there would be a requirement to have the septic and, hopefully, the well inspected. If there were any issues found at that time, it’s a good time to catch it and get it solved, because there’s money on the table. There’s a transaction happening between the buyer and the seller.”

She said failing septic systems could be polluting the home’s well water.

“A lot of times, the concern is contaminating ground water,” she said. “It may also get into surface water. For people who are on septic and wells, it’s even more important to have their septic (system) maintained for public health reasons. We wanted to make sure people were getting good drinking water. “

The Herald-Palladium reported that if the state failed to pass statewide regulations, the county was prepared to pass its own. Vavra said that neither happened and the topic fell by the wayside.

“We had some disagreements on how to move forward,” Vavra said. “(Real estate agents) didn’t want

the ordinance to interfere with the (sale) of the property, which I understand.”

He said that right now, septic systems are inspected by private companies before a home is sold, but there is no requirement for the person making the inspection to report the results to the health department.

“The forms that they use are varied and may or may not tell the whole story,” he said.

Hamilton said people who have lived in cities with sanitary sewer systems all their lives often don’t realize how important a septic system is if they buy a house in the country.

“When you’re not connected to a community sanitary system, you have your own onsite septic system,” she said. “When you flush your toilet and things go down your drain, it goes out of your house and into, usually, a tank, where things settle out. Then, the liquid goes out into a leach field and percolates into the ground water. That process filters out pollutants if it’s working correctly.”

She said a survey done by her organization in 2009 found that 57 percent of the people surveyed with septic systems didn’t know how they are maintained.

“It’s kind of like changing the oil in your car,” she said. “It’s a preventative thing you need to do every so often. And it’s usually recommended for a normal household to have their septic system pumped every three to five years, depending on use.”

She said when septic systems aren’t pumped out regularly, the solids can start moving into the leach field, clogging it and causing problems.

“Other problems that can happen is – the tank itself is usually concrete,” she said. “Sometimes people don’t know where their tanks are and they plant trees over them and the roots can go in and break into it and you can have stuff leaking out of it. People, sometimes if they don’t know where they are, they can drive over it, which could crack the tank.”

If a septic system is failing, the homeowners often don’t know, she said.

“If there’s a crack in the tank and it’s leaking out, it’s not going to cause backups in your house,” she said. “You could be causing pollution. If you’re on a well, you could be polluting your drinking water.”

Vavra said he plans to resurrect the committee in the near future to start the discussions, again. He said there were several issues committee members agreed on.

Hamilton said the Great Lakes contain one-third of the world’s fresh water, and the world isn’t creating more fresh water.

“It’s all we’ve got, so we’ve got to take care of it,” she said.

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