

## Scatter Creek Aquifer – Septic System Management Project

Purpose: To make sure water in the Scatter Creek Aquifer is safe to drink now and in the future.

**Citizen's Committee notes:** April 3, 2013, 6:15-8:15 pm. *Approved 5/1/13.*

Violet Prairie Grange: 17104 Violet Prairie Road SE; Tenino, WA

**Attending:** Karen Deal, Chanele Shaw, Sandra Adix, Lowell Deguise, Roger Max, Gene Weaver, Tom Budsberg, Art Starry (staff), Scott Schimelfenig (staff). **Facilitator:** Jane Mountjoy-Venning (staff). **Note taker:** Steve Petersen (staff). **Guests:** Karen Johnson. **Excused:** Marlene Hampton, Maureen Pretell, Bruce Morgan.

### Introductions

**Agenda review and approval:** approved

**Approve March notes:** approved

**Other housekeeping:** Checked to see if committee was still interested in a field trip to see the geology and water quality influences on the aquifer area. Yes, there is interest. Staff will develop a more detailed proposal for the committee.

### Report on any community input, questions, etc.:

A committee member is often asked just what we are doing, and if this is a plan to restrict land use activities or change septic system requirements. These questions are addressed on our website, [www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehsc](http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehsc) in the Frequently Asked Questions section and copied below.

What is the goal of the project?

*The goal of the project is to ensure that drinking water from the Scatter Creek aquifer is safe now and in the future.*

Will this project affect what I can do with my property?

*The project could result in recommendations to change current land use and/or septic system regulations. Depending on the results of the groundwater modeling and the findings of the advisory committee, the plan could address existing land uses or new development or both or neither. The goal of the project is to protect the quality of this vulnerable and essential groundwater resource for current and future residents of the area without unduly restricting property uses and impacting property value. That is why it is important to have input from as many different perspectives as possible from community representatives.*

Is the county going to make us replace our septic systems, or convert to sewer?

*The purpose of the study is to evaluate the pollution loads associated with septic systems and land use activities and develop a plan to protect the ground water. The citizen advisory committee will work with the health department to study the issues and make recommendations to include in the plan. Options for managing pollution from septic*

*systems will be open for discussion through this project. Options could include upgrading existing systems as well as establishing stricter standards for future septic systems. Community sewer service is also an alternative method of managing sewage disposal and could be considered, however, sewers cannot be extended into the rural area under current state law (the Growth Management Act). What the plan ultimately recommends will be the result of careful consideration of the scientific information and input from the community.*

**Overview of next phase of committee work:**

- Decide contaminants of concern that will be the focus of our work (is there something in addition to nitrate?)
- Decide levels of concern for contaminants.
- Prepare for more intensive community outreach and input.
- May: Work on scenarios for Nadine to run through computer model.
- June: Host public workshop to present known info/issues and get community input.
- Summer: Consider modeling results and community input to draft initial recommendations.
- Early-Mid Fall: Present initial recommendations to community for input.
- Mid-Late Fall: Consider community input and any new information (eg: modeling, monitoring, costs) to revise recommendations.
- Early Winter: Present revised recommendations and any new information to community for input. Finalize recommendations to present to the Board of Health, Health Officer, or Board of County Commissioners who are the ones that have the responsibility and authority to change laws and adopt policy that will implement the recommendations.

Question: \_ Should agency staff invited to participate by the committee participate in committee decision making?

**Decision: While agency staff are encouraged to participate in discussions and provide input, the decision-making will be done by the citizen advisory committee members.**

Reminder: Our ground rules say that when we are decision making, we will strive for substantial consensus with majority and minority opinions noted.

Points Raised in Discussion:

- Agency staff have valuable information and insight and are likely to be the ones to implement any recommendations. Getting their participation and buy-in makes it more likely recommendations will be implemented. It also might mean that the committee is less likely to recommend actions that are unrealistic and unable to be implemented.
- We may “shoot ourselves in the foot” if it is perceived by the community that citizens’ input was overshadowed by staff.
- Staff members already have some access to the policy makers (Board of Health, Board of Commissioners, etc) through their positions, so it is not necessary to provide them with a decision- making voice in the citizens committee. The purpose of the citizens committee is to provide citizens’ input.

## **Review key points and identify gaps:**

Key points identified by the committee to highlight when sharing information with community:

- The project is trying to understand impacts to the aquifer and prevent future problems.
- Sources of nitrates include land use activities and septic systems.
- Characteristics of the Scatter Creek Aquifer
  - It is vulnerable
  - It is fast flowing
  - The geology means there is no “lid” or protective cover to the aquifer, and that there is not another aquifer in the area.
- Clarify the difference between the boundary of the study area and the entire aquifer.
- Costs to protect the aquifer will be considered as the committee makes recommendations.
- This is an open process; input is still being taken. We should bring flip charts to record input and a FAQ handout to events.
- Septic systems are not to be taken for granted, as there are potential health impacts from sewage. We should include information about how to look for signs of a failing septic system and bring our septic display and brochures to events.
- Explain what the ground water model is and how we are using it.
- Let folks know that the water quality is good, but the aquifer is vulnerable. To be sure your drinking water from a private well is safe; test your water each year.

Identify areas where we need further information or clarification: None were identified at this time.

Questions: What nitrate level is of concern in the Scatter Creek area? What level would trigger action or the need for intervention? ie: In computer modeling how much nitrate is too much? Are there other pollutants we should be looking at or modeling?

**Decisions: Defer until next month after the committee sees more long-term nitrate trend data. With their current understanding, the level of concern for nitrate will be between 4 and 5. It may be more dependent on trends, than an actual number.**

### Reminders:

- Nitrate and bacteriological contaminants are the primary septic system pollutants addressed by state and county law
- Natural background levels for nitrate are less than 2 mg/L
- Thurston County nitrate early warning level is 2 mg/L
- Thurston County nitrate contaminant action level is 4 mg/L
- Washington State nitrate drinking water trigger is 5 mg/L
- Maximum nitrate level for safe drinking water is 10 mg/L
- Nitrate levels in Scatter Creek Aquifer vary

### Discussion:

- The background material about the Thurston County early warning levels (EWL) and contaminant action levels (CAL) for nitrate in groundwater is a helpful document and has good reasoning and good explanation behind the levels set in 1996. It comes from the Northern Thurston County Ground Water Management Plan and includes the resolution

passed by the Board of Health in 1996, setting the levels for the county. *(A copy is posted on the project website.)*

- There was some question as to why we would set a different level of concern than has already been determined.
- The state DOH uses a slightly higher level of concern for drinking water systems, some felt that level (5 mg/L) was still protective and offered less constriction on possible land-use activities.
- There was discussion about how this target level will be used, and whether it will require some kinds of changes. It was clarified that the committee would not be setting regulatory limits, only the Board of Health or other policy making body could do that after a public process. The level of concern that we are setting is to give guidance to the committee as we start to look at groundwater modeling outcomes about what levels of nitrogen seem okay and what seems like too much. This will also help us judge the effectiveness of potential scenarios to protect water quality.
- There was discussion about the importance of trends in water quality. In other words, a well which measured 4 mg/L of nitrate steadily over many years was less of a concern than a well which typically measures 2.5mg/L and is suddenly at 3 mg/L and then at 4 mg/L. The actual number was less important than the trend as far as triggering an investigation into the cause of the nitrate level.

**June public workshop planning:** We were short on time; so much of this discussion was postponed.

- Location: not discussed
- Date: *(last day school 6/12 Rochester, 6/14 Tenino; Swede Day 6/15)* Late in June, after school is out was the period recommended.
- Ideas to get the word out: Have an information table at Swede Day and Oregon Trail Days.
- Ideas for other ways of getting input, especially from voices or perspectives we may not otherwise hear from: not discussed

**Public Comment:** none

#### **Wrap up**

- Review any tasks/commitments & timeframe
- Review notes, capture any missing points