

## 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:** July 2, 2014, 6:15-9:00 pm *approved 8/6/14*  
Rochester School District Board Room, 10140 Highway 12 SW, Rochester, WA 98579

**Attending:** Maureen Pretell, Sandra Adix, Chanele Holbrook, Tom Budsberg, Amanda Neice, Roger Max, Gene Weaver, Bruce Morgan, Steve Petersen (staff). Facilitator: Jane Mountjoy-Venning (staff). Note taker: Elisa Kaufmann (staff). Excused: Art Starry (staff), Karen Deal. Guests: none. Absent: Marlene Hampton, Dave Defoe, Scott Schimelfenig. Resigned: Lowell Deguise

### Introductions

**Agenda review and approval:** approved

**Approve June notes:** approved

**Report on any community input, questions, etc.:** Gene Weaver letter and discussion

**Other housekeeping:**

Gene Weaver shared his July 2, 2014 letter to the citizen's committee and Jane Mountjoy-Venning shared Lowell Deguise's July 1, 2014 letter of resignation with the committee. Both letters are attached. A discussion followed, key points are noted below.

- There was great concern among members of the committee. They feel that if both Gene and Lowell were to resign we would no longer have balance on the committee and be missing much valuable input. There was discouragement that Lowell decided to resign.
- Members felt that the committee was functioning well, bringing up different viewpoints in a respectful manner. All the viewpoints are important to provide the best recommendations.
- A committee member suggested that we meet with the Board of Health, get feedback directly from them about our current preliminary recommendations, and hear what they are thinking or might want to add.
- Steve Petersen (staff) was involved in the Nisqually and Henderson Shellfish Protection District formation and recalled that the Board of Health listened to those citizen committees and took their suggestions seriously. He does not feel that the Board has pre-determined anything. He encouraged committee members to attend or continue to attend the next board briefing about the project, which has not yet been scheduled. It can take several months to get on the Board's calendar. Staff will work on scheduling a time with the Board of Health.
- A question was raised about the balance of protection vs. individual rights. A suggestion was made that it is appropriate to constrict individual rights when actions negatively affect others due to the lack of protection.
- Jane stepped out of her facilitator role to acknowledge a point raised in Lowell's letter that there is undo attention on problems in the aquifer while seeming to ignore positive water sample results. She shared that public health does have a bias toward looking for problems and then working on ways to prevent problems, similar to how engineers try many ways to break something and then keep designing until they are satisfied it is strong enough. One

reason the health department values citizen committees is to help bring perspective and balance into our decisions about the importance of protection compared to other community priorities and help guide what actions best meet these kind of diverse needs.

- Gene shared that he felt like the committee will make reasonable recommendations, but is skeptical that the studies will help the local citizens or be seriously considered by the Board.
- It was noted that there is some history, and a feeling that past citizen input was not heard. Some felt like it was not worth giving up – they should continue to try to influence the outcome.

The committee's main agenda focused on recommendation options for septic systems using the attached chart as a starting point for the discussion. Decisions and discussion points for each topic area are presented below.

**Decision - Septic Treatment Preliminary Recommendation:** The health department should encourage and provide incentives for nitrogen-reducing septic system technologies where appropriate.

**Discussion:**

- Do not feel that current aquifer conditions or worse case scenario modeled conditions are bad enough to warrant taking regulatory action, though there is concern that we don't want to wait until it is too late.
- Hesitant to require nitrogen-reducing technologies when the systems are still being tested for reliability and effectiveness, especially in prairie soils.
- There are currently seven types of proprietary devices that meet Level N (nitrogen-reducing) standards. They are more expensive initially and require ongoing service and maintenance including regular testing for effectiveness to assure they are providing the level of treatment needed. This does place a burden on the homeowner.
- Some felt it would be beneficial to have more data about how well the technology works in the field and that the county could encourage pilot sites to test this by offering incentives.
- Rather than choosing any particular technology, stay abreast of best management practices and new/best technology to meet treatment standards. Encourage people to adopt better treatment than minimal needed to meet requirements.
- Desire among some that part of regulations should include a final inspection when systems are installed to be sure they are installed correctly and up to standards. It was pointed out that some installation issues can only be detected while they are being installed, even a final inspection may not catch them. To do a 100% inspection program would require a large investment in staffing, which in turn would mean higher fees.
- There was some interest in establishing a system of monitoring with nitrate triggers to require nitrogen-reducing technology. There are details about how widespread and how long-lasting nitrate levels would need to be to trigger such requirements that would need to be figured out given the variable level of nitrates in the aquifer.

**Decision - Septic System Alternatives Preliminary Recommendation:** The health department should educate the public that alternative systems such as composting toilets and incinerating toilets can be permitted and installed in Thurston County. These systems should be

recognized as an approved nitrogen-reduction and water conservation method.

**Discussion:**

- Composting or incinerating toilets can substantially reduce nitrogen contribution from households. They do not eliminate the need for a septic system, because other water used in the home must be safely handled. Use of these types of toilets may allow for a smaller drainfield, but then future owners must either continue to use composting or incinerating toilets or upgrade the septic system if they chose to use standard toilets.
- Incinerating toilets have high-energy use.
- Composting and incinerating toilets should be officially recognized as an option for an approved nitrogen- reducing technology.

**Decision - Septic System Operation and Maintenance Preliminary Recommendation:** The health department should routinely provide education and outreach to residents and businesses in the Scatter Creek Aquifer Area about onsite sewage (septic) system operation and maintenance.

**Discussion:**

- Operational Certificates, which are required on more complex systems, help assure that septic systems are being checked regularly and that any problems are caught before they get too big or cause too much damage.
- Regular maintenance is important for septic system functioning, but will not reduce nitrogen loading. A well-functioning single-family septic system discharges nitrate concentrations of about 60 mg/l into the aquifer.
- Another stakeholder committee has been working on updating the county onsite sewage (OSS) plan. Their draft recommendations were shared. Of note to our committee was the recommendation that all OSS owners in the county be charged an annual flat fee of about \$40 to cover a septic educational and operation and maintenance program in the county. The recommended fee would replace the existing operational certificate fee, time or transfer fee, pump report fee, and MRA charges.

**Decision - Septic Siting Preliminary Recommendation:** Support the implementation of Article III, Section 5.1 that reads, “**Source Protection.** *All water sources shall be located, constructed, protected and maintained in a manner which will preserve the quality of the water source, minimize the potential for contamination, and prevent surface water from entering the water source.*” In the Scatter Creek Aquifer Area, particular attention should be paid to assure that septic systems are installed in locations that reduce the potential to create plumes of contamination that can adversely affect down gradient properties and wells.

**Discussion:**

- There was some discussion about whether or not to designate the Scatter Creek Aquifer Area an area of special concern. This will be considered at the September meeting.
- Increasing the distance between the well and OSS could be beneficial, though we would not want to bring the septic system closer to a neighbor’s well. It might be difficult on small lots to fit everything with increased distance requirements.
- Another strategy is strategically place septic drainfields in such a way that they are spread

over the groundwater flow, rather than stacked up along the flow to assure greater dilution of the effluent in the aquifer. There was discussion about how detailed information about the groundwater flow would need to be – generally know water moves from east to west, or require a hydrogeology report for each permit?

- One suggestion was to require increased distance between the well and the septic system unless the applicant has an alternative (siting or technology) that meets standards for reduced risk.
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**Decision - Sewer Preliminary Recommendation:** Thurston County Environmental Health should work in partnership with Thurston County Public Works, City of Tenino, WA Department of Health LOSS Program, WA Department of Ecology, and others to assure that any new sewer treatment plants for towns and urban growth areas and any expansion of existing facilities take into account what is known about the aquifer vulnerability and geology. The health department should provide comment to pursue alternative sewage disposal methods.

**Discussion:**

- Committee added clarification about who should work in partnership to the possible language included in the chart.
- Committee added language about expansion of existing sewer treatment plants.

**Discussion:** The issue of whether or not to recommend that the Board of Health designate the Scatter Creek Aquifer Area an area of special concern or some other special designation was discussed at several points during the evening. The committee was evenly split pro and con. This will be discussed again in September and include more details about the ramifications of any designation.

**Public Comment:** none.

**Wrap up:** A committee member asked for clarification on what is currently in place to deal with cesspools. When a cesspool is identified, it is deemed an automatic failure and must be removed and a septic system meeting current standards installed. Other types of failures may not result in a new septic system; they may be able to make repairs to remedy the situation.

Decision Making Process: (From our ground rules)

- Upcoming decisions will be included in the meeting agenda.
- Strive for substantial consensus.
- Both majority and minority opinions, viewpoints, concerns will be noted.
- To be clear, at times the facilitator will ask for a thumbs-up, thumbs-down indication from committee members.
- To reconsider a decision, we will follow a 2-stage process. Generally, this will be done only if something substantial has changed since the decision was made.
  - The committee discusses and decides whether to reconsider the decision.
  - If yes, the issue will be placed on a future agenda for discussion and decision.