

SUFFOLK HEALTH OFFICIALS OUTLINE CHANGES TO WASTEWATER PRACTICES TO TAKE EFFECT ON JULY 1, 2019

<https://www.suffolkcountyny.gov/News/suffolk-health-officials-outline-changes-to-wastewater-practices-to-take-effect-on-july-1-2019>

20 May 2019

Cesspools, outlawed in new construction since 1973, will no longer be allowed as replacements for old cesspools.

Homeowners are not required to replace existing systems, but voluntary replacements must meet 1973 standards for new systems.

For the first time, replacement of existing cesspools or septic systems will require filing of registrations with health department.

As part of a broad, multi-pronged effort to combat nitrogen pollution of groundwater and local bays, the Suffolk County Department of Health Services is preparing to implement changes to the Suffolk County Sanitary Code which were approved in 2017 and will take effect on July 1, 2019, Suffolk County Health Commissioner Dr. James Tomarken said today. Though new code provisions do not require that homeowners make any changes to existing systems, they do require that when homeowners choose to replace existing cesspools and septic systems, the new systems meet the same minimum standards that have been required for entirely new systems since 1973. For the first time, replacement of existing cesspools and septic systems will require registration of the new system with the Department of Health Services.

“These changes, unanimously approved by the Suffolk County Board of Health and supported by the Long Island Builders Institute, will close a loophole in the Sanitary Code that has existed for decades,” Commissioner Tomarken noted. “The use of cesspools in new construction has been outlawed in Suffolk County since 1973. Because the regulations did not address replacement systems, however, owners of cesspools had been able to simply replace a failed cesspool with another cesspool, rather than adding a septic tank to comply with the code requirements for new systems. That loophole will close on July 1, and health department staff has been working to create a streamlined process designed to make it easy for homeowners to comply with the new requirements.”

Beginning on July 1, 2019, when property owners determine that their systems need to be replaced or retrofitted, approval for the replacement or retrofit must be obtained from the health department. Approval can be obtained through the submission of an electronic registration form completed by the licensed liquid waste contractor hired by a homeowner to replace an existing cesspool or septic system. The new system must conform to current standards, which require, at a minimum, a septic tank preceding a leaching structure. The changes are codified in Article 6 of the Suffolk County Sanitary Code.

The health department has established a streamlined regulatory process to implement the new requirements. Licensed liquid waste contractors can initially notify the department of their intent to replace or retrofit a property owner’s existing cesspool or septic system through a dedicated county web portal at <http://ship.suffolkcountyny.gov>. Once the work is completed, contractors must submit

documentation indicating the system components installed. Health department staff will be available to assist licensed liquid waste contractors to address any issues related to the installation of a replacement or system retrofit. Homeowners may also voluntarily install innovative, onsite wastewater-treatment systems, which are designed to reduce nitrogen pollution, as an alternative to the use of a conventional septic system when replacing an existing cesspool or septic system.

Cesspools and septic systems have been identified as the primary source of nitrogen pollution that contributes to harmful algal blooms, beach closures and fish kills that have become increasingly common over the past decade. Currently, 75 percent of Suffolk County is unsewered, with approximately 360,000 residential onsite sewage disposal systems. Approximately 250,000 of these systems are cesspools, which discharge raw, untreated human waste and can contaminate surface and groundwater sources and contribute to harmful algal blooms.

Installation of a complete conventional septic system, consisting of a septic tank and leaching structure, can typically range from \$6,000 to \$8,000 per installation. Innovative alternative onsite wastewater systems (IA/OWTS) installations have an average cost of \$19,500 for a standard site. Suffolk County is currently offering [incentives](#) of up to \$30,000 to homeowners who opt to replace their current wastewater systems with innovative advanced treatment systems under the Suffolk County Septic Improvement Program and New York State's Septic System Replacement Program, administered by the Suffolk County Health Department.

“Over the past few years, the county has made historic progress in the effort to address longstanding concerns about the environmental impacts that result from the reliance on cesspools and septic systems,” said Dr. Tomarken. “The changes that will become effective on July 1 are another step forward, but homeowners should be aware that these changes do not include any requirement that a property owner upgrade or replace a functioning system. The new requirements are triggered when an existing system must be replaced or a homeowner chooses to upgrade their system.”

For more information about the new requirements and to learn more about the County’s Septic Improvement Program, homeowners can visit the www.reclaimourwater.info or contact the Department of Health Services Office of Ecology by email at septicdemo@suffolkcountyny.gov or by phone at (631)852-5811.

[Overview of 2017 Article 6 Amendments Regarding the Elimination of In-kind Cesspool Replacement](#)

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