

Keep Encouraging Public Assistance for Septic System Upgrades

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- **May 2018**

<https://www.onsiteinstaller.com/editorial/2018/05/keep-encouraging-public-assistance-for-septic-system-upgrades>

There's been some good news and bad news recently involving government coming to the aid of owners of failing septic systems. And that's the first topic in our potpourri of onsite news and notes in this column:

For years, the suggestion for federal, state and local governments to earmark public funds toward septic system upgrades has been a heavy lift. Wastewater industry groups have maintained that tax revenues should contribute to helping modernize decentralized wastewater infrastructure in America for the benefit of all. They've argued that the general public suffers when onsite systems fail to adequately treat septic tank effluent.

Despite a message of serving the common good, the idea of directing public funds to private homeowners and businesses has always been met with reservations. When the government subsidizes the repair and replacement of septic systems, the homeowners are the beneficiaries of increased property values. Some would say it's only appropriate to support a crumbling wastewater infrastructure when it involves a public treatment system.

In recent years, there have been many little chinks in the armor of public funding of private wastewater projects. A handful of states have started to award grants to county health departments to dole out money to help defray the cost of private system repair and replacement. Then a few months ago, New York state blew a huge hole through that armor.

As part of New York's \$2.5 billion Clean Water Infrastructure Act of 2017, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced a \$75 million program to replace aging septic systems. The plan will begin this year with distributing \$15 million in 31 counties, paying 50 percent of eligible costs up to \$10,000 to replace aging septic systems. The Septic System Replacement Fund will first attack problems of failing systems in areas with known impaired water sources and around sensitive waterways.

“Protecting water quality is vital to the health and future growth of our communities. This program builds on this administration's efforts to upgrade and

improve water infrastructure across the state and help protect New York's lakes, streams and environmental resources," Cuomo says in announcing the payouts.

This is welcome news for homeowners who may understand the need to replace their systems but don't have the financial resources to pay for improvements. It's also good news for onsite installers who constantly face the balancing act of designing effective but affordable systems for their customers. They know that if a \$14,000 system ends up costing the homeowner \$7,000 through these grants, homeowners are more likely to move forward with necessary replacements.

That's good for the system user, the environment and the installer. Let's hope the New York program is a sign of more public support of decentralized wastewater systems.

SLOW DOWN CESSPOOL REPLACEMENT?

On New York's Long Island, one town at the center of a movement to replace polluting cesspools is rowing hard against the current. Officials in the village of Sagaponack want to take a wait-and-see approach when it comes to getting rid of cesspools in one of the few areas in the U.S. where they are still allowed. This is counter to the state's efforts, and it's mystifying how they would oppose the upgrades to advanced nitrogen-reduction systems called on for all of Long Island.

"This is a very big change," the deputy mayor, Lee Foster, says at a board meeting recently. "These are very much more sophisticated systems, and I want to see how well they're working and whether there's been any profound difficulties with maintenance. I think maintenance is going to be an issue."

Despite a community preservation fund that will pay most or all of the cost of some system upgrades, Foster wants to slow down the process. "We're going to revisit it, of course," she says. "But you have to see how well these systems are working over a period of time, and we don't have those answers."

I could save Foster some time and get the village moving toward cleaner water. Get rid of the cesspools now, and don't fear the new advanced treatment systems already going in the ground in your neighboring communities. That you still have hundreds of thousands of cesspools on Long Island should be a source of embarrassment when they have been outlawed elsewhere for decades.

This industry's nitrogen-reduction technologies have been proven time and again in other parts of the country. Make a few phone calls to system manufacturers, and they will put you in touch with local health department officials who can fill you in on how well the technologies work. You have no reason to wait and continue to put up with early American wastewater treatment.