

Making Progress With Onsite Performance On Long Island, New York

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Wastewater contractors are setting new standards for professionalism in this densely populated area of suburban New York City.



Linda Perlow, of the Long Island Liquid Waste Association Inc., at www.lilwa.org or by calling 631/585-0448.

It's the most populated island in the nation and one of the most populated in the world. It may be surprising to learn that about half the people on Long Island, N.Y., the bustling suburb of New York City, are served by onsite wastewater systems.

While it technically includes Brooklyn and Queens, two boroughs of NYC, the common definition of Long Island is the area covered by Nassau and Suffolk counties; nearly 3 million people packed into 1,200 square miles.

Most of Nassau County (population 1.3 million) is sewered, but infrastructure growth didn't keep up with population growth over the last few decades in Suffolk County. With 1.5 million people, it has more than 360,000 residential onsite wastewater systems, according to the county's Department of Health Services. Studies have shown that it would cost billions of dollars to provide sewer service to everyone in the county.

So there is a large onsite industry, represented by the Long Island Liquid Waste Association. Started in 1974, its 75 members represent about 95 percent of the septic companies on Long Island, according to Executive Director Linda Perlow, who has held the post since 1992.

An association for just two counties seems unusual. So the obvious question is why?

Perlow: Long Island is different than the rest of New York; it's almost like its own body. We don't have the same geography; we have sandy soil so our septic systems are different, and we have a lot of onsite systems. There is a need for the large number of onsite professionals we have; they are busy.

While most of Nassau County is sewered, about 70 percent of Suffolk County uses onsite systems. We all know many systems are not serviced on a regular basis or are in need of upgrading. As responsible business people in our industry, we would like to change this for

the better. The county is analyzing on a house-by-house basis which homes should be sewerred, which need improved onsite systems and which can be a part of neighborhood-cluster projects.

Long Island is also very vulnerable to nitrogen intrusion. So these are things we're discussing with our local communities and organizations to find common ground.

How is LILWA contributing to finding solutions?

Perlow: Our members live on Long Island, so not only are we concerned about our businesses, we're concerned about the well-being of our families. We have to come to grips with the fact that our infrastructure is not adequate to deal with the rapid growth of eastern Long Island and adopt rational policies to deal with it.

We are cooperating with local groups that have received grant funding. The Coordinated Environmental Solutions for Septic Problems Occurring on Long Island project [CESSPOOL] was funded by a Local Waterfront Revitalization Program grant from the New York Department of State. The goal is to raise public awareness of the importance of regular inspections, maintenance and repairing and/or upgrading residential onsite systems.

The Long Island Sound Study Futures Fund, a partnership of 32 municipalities, sponsored a conference for local officials to raise their awareness. And it sponsored free field training certification for onsite professionals, local government staff, consultants, engineers, planners and state officials.

You look back 30 years ago, we didn't have the kind of fantastic relationship we have now between government and the onsite industry. It used to be rallying the troops and circling the wagons. Now we work well together; they come to us to sit down and talk about what we have to do.

What has LILWA done to improve the industry?

Perlow: LILWA was very involved in getting our own septic license for Suffolk County, which is very important. Contractors who do work on septic systems have to be licensed through the county. At one point, they were covered by a home improvement license. Onsite wastewater is a whole different ballgame than things like kitchens, bathrooms and roofs. Nassau County still does it that way [installers must also be licensed plumbers], but onsite systems aren't as prevalent there.

We have LILWA board members who sit on the advisory committee for Suffolk County, which meets once a month. We are now trying to evolve their license into one that is more specific to what people do, such as pumping or installing.

We also have had our own voluntary certification for more than 20 years. LILWA certification is good for three years. It started with pumpers and maintenance technicians and has expanded to include installers. Suffolk County is starting to look at the feasibility of using our certification for their licensing. That would be down the road, but we don't know how far.

Many of the systems we have on Long Island were built 40-plus years ago. A lot of them are septic with block cesspools serving as the leachfield, and we are starting to have problems with the cesspools collapsing. We are working with the civic and government organizations on an onsite inspection requirement, probably at the time of the sale of a house. It has to be addressed, but you can't have everyone replacing their cesspools; the cost would be astronomical. Doing it as houses are sold would be more affordable.

What other issues are on your radar?

Perlow: Our latest is grease. There is no place to dispose of grease on Long Island. It is being trucked to plants in northern Virginia and upstate New York, on the Canadian border. The cost of shipping it hundreds of miles is adding substantial cost and is becoming prohibitive. If it continues, companies will simply stop servicing the grease traps, leaving their customers with no alternative but to turn to the illegal dumpers.

What do you see as the future of the onsite industry on Long Island?

Perlow: Much of Long Island uses onsite systems and due to economic constraints, it will be that way for some time to come. It would be economically unfeasible to try to sewer all of Suffolk County. As time goes by, hopefully people will replace their systems. The septic industry on Long Island will be here a lot longer than me, and that's why professionalism is so important.