

December 30, 2004

About 10 days before Thanksgiving I made one of those phone calls so important for a homeowner. It was to my septic tank guy. No, my system had not backed up. I was thinking ahead.

A few days before my timely phone call, two neighbors ended up ankle deep in septic-tank backup. Their phone calls were made when the problem was, let's say, visible. That predicament was enough warning. I believe in preventive maintenance.

More of us need to think the same way.

While liquid waste disposal is not a problem in Nassau County, it is a growing concern in Suffolk. There, new-home construction countywide has averaged nearly 3,000 annually the past two to three years, and is expected to increase slightly in 2005, according to the Long Island Builders Institute. The number of new homes, most of which discharge liquid household waste into septic systems, is putting added pressure on the county's primary disposal site, Bergen Point Sewage Treatment Plant in West Babylon.

Contractors who pump out septic systems say the disposal site often reaches capacity early in the day and so must close. Over the next several years, as more new homes are built and more tanks need to be pumped, these same contractors fear Bergen Point won't be able to handle the demand. Treatment plants in Southampton and Riverhead accept septic waste, but are not as centrally located. "Haulers prefer Bergen Point because of its location and it is less expensive," said Judge Coleman, president of the Long Island Liquid Waste Association. Town disposal sites, such as those in Huntington and East Hampton, take waste only from residents' homes, so contractors say they have few options.

"It's getting harder and harder to dump the waste," said Michael Deering, Suffolk County director of environmental affairs. "Facilities that will accept the waste are reaching capacity and not staying open as long."

Long lines and increased disposal fees (beginning Jan. 1) are putting pressure on contractors. "This year the lines were so long at Bergen Point, and on many days the place closed in the middle of the afternoon," said Foster Rignola of Rignola Cesspool Service in East Hampton. "You'd have to come back early the next morning to empty your truck."

Some contractors don't bother to return. There have been instances of haulers depositing waste illegally into storm drains or septic systems of large shopping centers. "Some truck is emptying its contents and who in a shopping mall is going to ask questions?" said Ernie Busch of Busch Bros. Cesspool, Sewer & Drain in North Amityville.

Suffolk is choosing a consultant to study the proposed building of a privately owned disposal facility on county-owned land, Deering said. But waste haulers figure completion of such a facility is years away. "Five years for the study, five more for the contract and then five more to build it," said Frank Aparo of Aparo Sanitary & Environmental Services in Bay Shore. "With all the people on Long Island and to have one main disposal site, that's crazy."

Nearly 75 percent of Suffolk County homes are hooked up to septic systems. These underground systems dispose of liquid waste - from sinks, washing machines and toilets - by dispersing it through the soil. A main tank separates the waste into three layers, solid, clear effluent and scum. As the main tank fills, the clear effluent middle layer is pushed into one or two seepage pits.

In Nassau County, where annual new home construction has averaged about 950 during the past two to three years, there isn't the same septic tank worry; about 90 percent of Nassau homes dispose of liquid waste through sewer systems.

Long Island Liquid Waste Association members want Suffolk to make disposal concerns a priority. Deering said disposal is an issue but believes there is time. The county is looking at hooking up more homes to sewers and even using "graywater" for landscape irrigation of public buildings, including golf courses. Graywater is residential discharge water, excluding waste from toilets, that can be reused for other purposes, especially landscape irrigation.

"There are issues regarding health when reusing graywater," Deering said, "and we are studying whether some of these things can be done safely."

Waste-hauling contractors just want things to move quickly. "If something is not done, then it becomes an environmental issue," Coleman said. "In our opinion, we needed another disposal site five years ago."

Find out more

For more information on septic system maintenance, visit the Long Island Liquid Waste Association Web site, www.lilwa.org. The site lists several services, including companies that pump tanks and install new systems. Online information also is available at the Small Flows Clearinghouse, www.nesc.wvu.edu/nsfc, a federally funded project of West Virginia University.

One sure way to keep your system operating smoothly is to have the tank pumped regularly. Generally speaking, this should be done every two to three years. However, if you have an old "block" system, built prior to 1973, excessive pumping can cause the system to collapse.

If you aren't knowledgeable about your system, call a contractor to help you locate it and recommend service.