

'Block' Construction Cesspools a "Considerable Danger" _Southampton Press



In a copyrighted article dated October 21, 2005, the **Southampton Press** explored the dangers of older, 'block construction' cesspools that are so common in eastern Long Island.

The Long Island Liquid Waste Association believes that the article is a well researched and clear presentation of the facts surrounding this important issue. Hopefully, it will serve to raise awareness among homeowners who might not realize the potential dangers that may be lurking under their feet.

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Here Comes That Sinking Feeling

Cesspools may create clear and imminent danger

By Kathryn Jackson Fallon

If a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, then a complete lack of knowledge can be deadly. While this logic seems dramatic when applied to a topic as seemingly mundane as cesspools, the fact is that homeowners who are unknowing about these systems can be putting themselves in considerable danger. Several years ago, a homeowner on Long Island had a fatal fall into a cesspool in his own backyard. There were no obvious signs warning the 35-year-old man of the danger below.

While this might be an extreme example of what can happen when a covertly crumbling cesspool is ignored and neglected, it is a judicious warning to homeowners to be aware of the location and condition of the cesspools on their properties.

The Way the Cesspool Crumbles

More than half of the homes on the East End of Long Island have older, 'block'-style cesspools. Any building permit drawn before 1972 most likely has these aged systems, which are made of cinder blocks and/or bricks and thus weaken over time. That deterioration can result in anything from a disorienting slope in the yard to an unexpected cave-in with dire consequences. What happens is that over time the mortar between the blocks and even the blocks themselves wear out after years of freezing and thawing. A high water table and the pressure drop when the cesspool is pumped out can also contribute to the problem. Newer cesspools, recast and made of concrete and steel, are less prone to problems. According to Joseph Carrello of Emil Norsic & Son in Southampton, homeowners need to know where the system is and when it was put in. About 60 to 70 percent of the systems on the East End are the old kind.

Where, Oh Where?

In addition to not knowing about their cesspool's condition, many homeowners have no idea where the cesspool is on their properties. A 12-foot-by-12-foot cavern, a cesspool is less an elephant in the living room and more a sleeping

monster. Knowing its location in your yard is critical in preventing cave-ins—particularly those caused by delivery trucks that roll over the weak spot that could be under the driveway.

According to contractor Thomas Johnson, "With properties such as flag lots, I have found cesspools that belong to house A on the lot of house B. This creates some difficulty." Within subdivisions, too, sometimes a cesspool might not be on the homeowner's property. In addition, two homes can share one cesspool, unbeknownst to either homeowner.

The Original Intention

Septic systems, when properly maintained and upgraded, can do the job in rural areas where houses spaced far apart make the installation of sewers too expensive. However, says Scott A. Carlin, associate professor of environmental studies and geography at Southampton College, "As areas become more developed, septic systems become a less effective option for treating wastewater. We are surrounded by bays and the ocean here, and cesspools leach nutrients into the groundwater that flows toward the coasts. Excessive nutrients in the waters lead to algae blooms. It is also possible to contaminate shallow private drinking wells with poorly sited septic systems." There is some debate about whether cesspools should be continued on the East End. According to Mr. Carlin, the time may already be here for expanded sewers. "At some point, communities have to move toward centralized sewage systems," he said. "From an environmental perspective, septic systems are not ideal, but the alternatives are generally more expensive."

An Option for the East End?

Contractor Thomas Johnson believes that septic systems can be efficient if they are upgraded. But he also contends that homeowners have to know as much about the septic system on their properties for their own good as well as for the good of the community.

"People need to know how the septic system is functioning and where it is," he advised. "Out on the East End, we live on top of our water and have well water in a lot of areas. We want to be sure that it is not compromised by septic systems. Be aware of your own and the neighbor's well or a pond or stream, and also what you are using in the home for cleaning and painting, etc, and the proper way to dispose of it—not down the drain."

Mr. Johnson pointed out the importance of using a responsible contractor who removes the waste to a legal disposal site. As an added health and environmental precaution, he suggested installing a small filter in the outlet side of the tank, which would be cleaned as a part of routine maintenance. "This would also prevent smaller floating debris from going out into the leaching pool," he said.

Warnings and Remediation

For now, septic systems are here—even if not to stay. So it behooves the homeowner to learn some tips on how to keep a cesspool from becoming a dangerous liability. Mr. Carrello had a couple of quick suggestions.

First, don't let cars and delivery trucks unknowingly park over the cesspool area. Second, don't have the cesspool pumped out completely—it could lead to a cave-in. He further suggested that it might be wise for the towns to require inspections of the systems, and upgrading, if necessary, when there is a transfer of property. If a newer cesspool is installed, the old one must be removed or the danger remains.

Of course, if you're purchasing or considering purchasing a new home, make sure you know the condition of the cesspool system - and where it is.