



Craig



Flood



Hackbarth

Septic system fixes bring groundwater protections

Cedar Beach on Lake Zumbro is one of 30-plus communities to benefit from a grassroots approach to solving hard-to-fix, out-of-compliance septic problems in southeastern Minnesota.



Lake views and proximity to Rochester drew residents such as Lois Hackbarth to Cedar Beach. This is the view from her home, one of 23 now connected to a shared sewage treatment system. The Southeast Minnesota Wastewater Initiative helped residents choose a system and secure grants. Courtesy Photo

ORONOCO — Cedar Beach once was a collection of small cabins built in the '30s and '40s as weekend getaways for Rochester city dwellers. Gradually, permanent residents moved in, transforming cabins into family homes.

As long as the toilets worked, the sinks drained and the basements stayed dry, no one thought about the septic systems.

"When I first moved out here,

that wasn't even a thought of mine," said Alice Flood, 69. Attracted to the lakeshore property and small-town atmosphere, she and her young family moved into a converted cabin in 1976.

Then one February in the early 1990s her drainfield froze. For nearly two months until it could be fixed, her three elementary school-age children showered at friends' houses or at school. She did laundry at the laundromat. A neighbor periodically flushed

“

I think most people were recognizing that this was a good thing and very good for the health of the lake, too, because you didn't have any problems with sewage getting into the lake.

— Lois Hackbarth,
Cedar Beach

”

out the septic system.

“What happens the next time? How long is this going to last?” Flood said.

Her system was still working 10 years ago when a septic inventory of Olmsted and Wabasha counties determined Cedar Beach’s under-sized lots were out of compliance. Some needed upgrading. Some had straight-pipe systems that fed directly into ditches or the Zumbro River. Flood and her neighbors hadn’t considered a community system until they met Sheila Craig.

Craig is the southern region community sewage treatment facilitator for the Southeast Minnesota Wastewater Initiative. The 14-county SMWI seeks remedies for small communities with failing septic systems.

“If they were easily fixed, we wouldn’t get them,” Craig said.

In one case, the solution was a 6-mile-long pipe from West Jefferson to Cleveland in Le Sueur County.

Flood served as a liaison for Cedar Beach, fielding complaints and relaying them to Craig, the township and the company that ultimately installed the 23-home shared cluster treatment system.

Cedar Beach is among 31 small communities the SMWI has helped bring into compliance, starting with Minnesota Pollution Control Agency funding in 2002. Four of those are on Lake Zumbro.

“A lot of these have what I call the first system after the outhouse with a cesspool or a drywell,” Craig said. “Back in the day, that was an OK way to treat your sewage. They’ve since learned that’s not really treating it properly. It can still get into the groundwater.”



Lois Hackbarth captured a sunset over Lake Zumbro. **Courtesy Photo**

Since 2012, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources has supported the SMWI with three Clean Water Fund grants totaling \$771,700. Part of the BWSR grants have paid Craig’s part-time salary. The last one expires this fall.

Craig’s first task is to help communities understand the problem. She then works with residents to choose a solution, applies for grant funding and acts as a liaison to local government.

The process typically takes four to seven years.

It’s difficult for property owners to organize, reach consensus, navigate deadlines and apply for grants. Project partners have included township and county governments, the MPCA and the Public Facilities Authority.

“We weren’t aware what could be done and needed to be done,” said Lois Hackbarth, 76, who moved to Cedar Beach from Rochester nearly 10 years ago. “(Craig) applied for grants. She went to the right government agencies. She just knew what to do.”

When the problem isn’t obvious — Craig has amassed a collection of raw-sewage

photos since she started the job in 2003 — it’s harder to convince property owners that something needs to be done.

My toilet flushes.

It’s a refrain Flood heard from Cedar Beach residents who didn’t see the need for a community system.

“Why do we have to? My toilet flushes just fine today,” Flood heard.

Cost was the No. 1 concern. The community septic cost each Cedar Beach property owner about \$13,300 (assessed over 20 years) for a low-interest Small Communities Wastewater Construction loan, plus an annual \$475 maintenance fee.

Grants covered 72 percent of the cluster mound, grinder pumps and collection system costs. They included a \$749,700 Point Source Implementation Grant and a \$245,800 Small Communities Wastewater Construction Grant.

“Start with yourself and what would it cost you if your septic blew up or it just didn’t function,” Flood advised.

“Everybody believes in the

Counties Involved

Dakota, Dodge, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, Le Sueur, Mower, Olmsted, Rice, Steele, Wabasha, Waseca and Winona.

clean water. Nobody was (disputing) that. It was, ‘Are you kidding me? For a single person, I don’t flush my toilet that many times a day. I don’t shower every day.’”

Flood advises communities considering similar projects to make sure everyone — especially those opposed — attends meetings so they know the facts.

Since the system went online in late 2016, the company has resolved initial odor and sound issues. It’s working to restore landscaping damaged during installation. That’s been the biggest continuing issue among residents.

For Hackbarth, the community system solved another problem. With a septic in her yard, there wasn’t enough room to build a garage. Since the community system went in, she had her septic system removed and 30-by-28-foot detached garage built.

Craig, meanwhile, is on to the next 12 projects in the works throughout the region.



The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ mission is to improve and protect Minnesota’s water and soil resources by working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners. www.bwsr.state.mn.us.