

Turning wastewater problems into solutions in the City of Myrtle



The unsewered community of Myrtle, located 15 miles southeast of Albert Lea, had a problem.

Thirty-one properties within Myrtle were connected to a community straight pipe that was discharging raw sewage into Deer Creek, a tributary of the Cedar River. As a result, Myrtle was listed by the Minnesota Pollution Control

Agency as a high priority area to fix their wastewater discharge issue.

The negative health and environmental effects of raw sewage are numerous, which is why it's critical to keep it from entering surface or groundwater. The bacteria in human waste, such as E. coli, can cause disease, while the solids and chemical breakdown in sewage can damage bodies of water that support wildlife by affecting the ability of fish and organisms to see and breathe.

The fix to the Myrtle problem was the creation of the Myrtle On-Site Sewer Solutions Project. The project began with investigative studies by consultants that identified alternative wastewater solutions, barriers, and potential next steps.

In 2013, Wastewater Facilitators Sheila Craig and Aaron Wills with the Southeast Minnesota Wastewater Initiative met with the Myrtle City Council to gather feedback on options and potential costs.

The city was most interested in property buyout of vacant and blighted properties, or other options not requiring city management of a waste treatment system. The property buyout option would allow systems with inadequate space for a septic treatment system to be constructed on adjacent property.



Septic tank overflowing with sewage due to damage or tile blockage in Myrtle.

The alternative was holding tanks, but that option wasn't considered to be financially viable for residents. According to Craig the project faced many obstacles, including a lack of space for septic installation, wet soils, and landowners without the financial means to afford the replacement of their system.

Wills worked with the City of Myrtle, residents, and Freeborn County to facilitate conversations and help find project funding to implement a solution.

In 2015 Freeborn County applied for a Competitive Clean Water Projects and Practices Grant to move the project forward. The grant provided cost-share assistance for up to 28 low income property owners to construct individual septic systems.

According to Rachel Wehner, Freeborn County Environmental Health Coordinator, one of the most difficult aspects of the project was getting residents on board with the project, "It can be a tough transition for people to go from having a sewer that they viewed as working, to thinking about clean water."

Much of the work during 2016 involved preparation and pre-planning. The city held town hall meetings, a Memorandum of Understanding was established between the City and Freeborn County, three properties were acquired and demolished, local policy and contracts were written, funding qualifications were determined, and landowners began to work with septic designers.

According to Wehner, “Although it seemed difficult to get this project moving forward in a small community, available contractors were in high demand and did a great job working with individual landowners.”

By the end of the 2017 construction season, 26 landowners either had a final design completed or were in the process of completing one, two remain undecided, and 20 residential homes had newly installed septic systems. The remaining septic systems will be installed during the 2018 construction season.



A newly constructed septic mound.