

PROJECT MEMORANDUM: DECEMBER 2006

South Central Itasca County Wastewater Initiative Team- A Recommendation for Action

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For more information go to:

www.arrowheadplanning.org/itascawastewater or contact
Andy Hubley at 218-529-7512 or ahubley@ardc.org.

Introduction

Water is a vital resource to Itasca County that is important to the citizens' quality of life. Itasca County has many rivers and lakes that provide recreation, commerce, and scenic views to many residents and visitors each year. With the growing popularity of building homes (cabins, seasonal residences, and year-round homes) on the shores of lakes and streams and in rural areas of the County, there is a growing threat to the area that could diminish water quality. This threat is the increasing number of individual sewage treatment systems (ISTS), also known as septic systems. Septic systems that are not managed properly could become a source of pollution for area waters. While the water quality of the area is currently stable, if standards are not put in place to protect water quality unfortunate events could follow, including health threats, decreased land values, vegetation changes, wildlife decline, scenic beauty degradation, and a decline in tourism.

The South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board understands the importance of water in the Region's economy and quality of life. In 2004, the Board began a proactive examination of ways to preserve drinking water quality and keep lakes clean and clear. They formed the Wastewater Initiative Team (I-Team) in order to discuss ways to better guarantee that Individual Sewage Treatment Systems will not pollute the area's waters.

Description of Process

After hearing concerns about septic issues from local citizens, the South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board conducted a study in 2005 to learn about wastewater in the Grand Rapids area. A report that was published as the result of this process outlined the area's current septic facilities and existing concerns. Included with this report was a set of recommendations that outlined a process for creating a sanitary district to manage septics. The recommendations proposed a search for funding for future planning, creating a formal wastewater initiative team, meeting with the public and problem areas, and conducting septic testing. Following these steps, decisions would need to be made regarding what kind of management needs to be initiated. This report, called the South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board Wastewater Management Scoping Project, can be found at:

www.arrowheadplanning.org/itascawastewater

The Wastewater I-team was formalized in December of 2005 for the purpose of carrying out the recommendations of the 2005 document. The committee includes elected officials, government professionals (zoning officials, PUC managers), PUC and Planning Commission members, citizens, and wastewater professionals (testers, designers, and installers). In the spring and summer of 2006, the I-Team met and decided to gauge public support for a sanitary district to manage septic in a seven-township sized area of Itasca County including and surrounding Grand Rapids. In August and September of 2006 four public meetings were held to educate and gauge the public support of a sanitary district. The meetings were only moderately attended, but good input was received. A description of the meetings and the input is included on page 4 of this document.

Description of Process Funding Sources

Funding for the I-team and this planning process has come from several different sources. The South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board has contributed \$10,000 to the project. Their contribution was a combination of funds from the Blandin Foundation, Iron Range Resources, and local governments. This project has also received \$10,000 from the Itasca County Environmental Trust Fund. The Arrowhead Regional Development Commission also provided a \$5,000 in-kind community-planning grant for staff representation. The Northeast Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development

Partnership provided \$5,000 towards the project to augment the participation of the University of Minnesota Extension Service, an agency that also provided in-kind services.

Project Partners and I-Team Members

ARDC and the Wastewater I-Team thank the participants in this process, especially the following people:

- Norley Hansen, Cohasset Citizen, I-Team Chair
- Dennis O'Toole, Grand Rapids Citizen, I-Team Vice Chair
- Catherine McLynn, Itasca County Commissioner
- Laurie Brown, Extension Service Wastewater Educator
- Don Dewey and Rita Quesnell, Itasca County Environmental Services
- All others that attended meetings and provided ideas and input

Public Meeting Summary

In August and September of 2006 four public outreach meetings were held. These meetings were held at a variety of places and times to maximize availability and turnout. The meetings were held at the Trout Lake Community Center, the Grand Rapids Area Library, the Arbo Town Hall, and the Cohasset Community Center. In order to maximize the opportunity for people to attend, meeting times and days of the week varied, including one Saturday morning meeting. All the meetings followed the same agenda with presentations followed by time for questions and answers where attendees could voice their opinion on the topic.

During the meeting, Laurie Brown, University of Minnesota Extension Service, gave a presentation on Individual Septic Treatment Systems (ISTS). Her presentation gave a technical background and educated the public about septic systems in general. Brown explained how the different types of systems work and what soils facilitate systems. The public who attended the meetings responded well to Brown's presentation highlighting the importance of having more homeowner education meetings.

Andy Hubley from ARDC gave a presentation regarding the idea of creating a sanitary district for South Central Itasca County. He gave background information on ARDC, the I-Team, the previous planning process that was conducted by the SCICIPB, and the townships and areas that are considering being included. He concluded his presentation by explaining why the I-Team was poised to recommend the formation of a sanitary district.

Hubley explained to the public that the I-Team is recommending the formation of government entity that manages septics, but that the level of management it would provide was still being discussed. Some districts do nothing more than remind homeowners to have their septics maintained/inspected and document inspection results. Other districts have inspectors on staff that fully administer homeowner's septics for them. Hubley also explained that a sanitary district could have a strong educational, grant writing, and project coordination role.

During the comment and question part of the agenda, attendees were cautiously in favor of increased management of on-site septic systems. The idea of a sanitary district was not viewed as the only option, however. Many people questioned why the County does not enforce current laws with current employees and budgets. Others wanted townships and cities to be the lead entities on this effort. Focusing on known problem areas of a smaller dimension (surrounding particular lakes) was also brought up. Concerns about a sanitary district's fees and bureaucracy were also a key theme in public comments.

Several people stated they do not trust government to efficiently address the issue (“waste of money”). Some people said that they feel that this issue is “a zoning problem,” noting that the minimum parcel size in rural Itasca County is much smaller than many other counties in Minnesota. Others spoke favorably about the idea for a sanitary district, citing a district’s ability to focus on wastewater, address cluster systems, and provide a higher level of education. Several people stated their concerns about future water quality issues due to an increase in septic issues. The education aspects of the presentation were very well received. A full description of the public meetings is included in this document, starting on page 11.



Recommendation

The South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board (SCICIPB) feels it has received enough public input to assert that there is support for increased management of Individual Sewage Treatment Systems (ISTS) in South Central Itasca County. The Board is recommending:

The South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board recommends that a Sanitary District be formed for all of Itasca County for the purposes of managing on-site Individual Sewage Treatment Systems and on-site Cluster Sewage Treatment Systems. The SCICIPB recommends that local Cities and Towns determine their participation in the programs and the fees of the Sanitary District. The SCICIPB recommends that areas outside these local sub-districts not be subject to the authority of the Sanitary District until that area chooses to participate.

The Board also recommends:

- That the District be administered by the existing Environmental Services Department of Itasca County
- That a fee be charged to each septic owner in the participating entities in order to provide long-term funding for the District's staffing and activities (a similar nearby district charges \$25.00 per year)
- That the costs associated with district formation be paid through grants and other public sources
- That the District provide homeowner education, ISTS installation and replacement oversight, required ISTS maintenance reminders and enforcement, data development and analysis, grant and low-interest loan programs for ISTS replacements
- That the District use its grant and loan programs as incentive for entities to participate
- That the District be guided by a Board of Directors that is appointed by the Itasca County Board of Commissioners

Note that the recommendation outlines a County-wide effort, rather than the original seven township-sized area originally proposed. It also makes participation a decision of local entities. These changes are in response to the public input received at the outreach meetings.

Reasons for the Recommendation

1. Good water quality is a key to a strong economy and an excellent quality of life
2. Well maintained septics are a very safe and cost effective way of treating wastewater well into the future

3. Studies exploring areas for expanding existing centralized sewer systems have determined that option to be extremely expensive and therefore unfeasible
4. Increasing development pressures means that previously marginal lots for septic systems are being developed-these lots might need more maintenance oversight
5. Enforcing wastewater rules through the use of a County ordinance rather than creating a district would not involve septic systems within any city's limits and would not have a funding source for long-term management
6. Home values are lower on lakes with poor water quality and homes are difficult to sell if there are drinking water concerns
7. State-wide regulations and programs regarding septic systems and water quality are being discussed...the Wastewater I-Team feels being proactive will make the County better prepared to address future State regulations and offers local control
8. Cost savings for homeowners due to:
 - a. Reducing the need for central system extension
 - b. Longer septic life due to better maintenance
 - c. Reduced possibility for incorrect installation
 - d. Replacement grants and low-interest loans
 - e. A district's ability to allow the use of non-conforming but functional systems
 - f. Smaller fees than central sewer systems
9. Cluster systems are being constructed in the County...cluster systems need a professional level of management with which a District can assist
10. Increased management means less failures
11. ISTS management allows continued development (good for the economy) without compromising water quality
12. A sanitary district is likely to be able to deal with PUD's and other unique development in an efficient manner with expertise about septic systems
13. More coordination opportunities
14. Better ability to conduct studies and research
15. Better ability to address homeowner questions and concerns
16. Better ability to seek and secure grants from state, federal, and other outside sources
17. Good resource for homeowner education

Action Steps

Steps A and B are the responsibility of the South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board (SCICIPB).

- A. Submit this report and a sample resolution approving of the document to each entity involved in the SCICIPB for their consideration. A cover letter should instruct the entity to approve the resolution and return it or table it and submit questions to the SCICIPB. SCICIPB staff will lead this effort with assistance from ARDC.
 - 1) Assemble mailing
 - 2) Send mailing
 - 3) Document resolutions or questions

- B. Address questions from entities at the next SCICIPB meeting and hold vote to approve recommendation (for the purposes of this document it assumed that the recommendation will pass). ARDC will assist in addressing questions.
 - 1) Address questions
 - 2) Request approval of the resolution
 - 3) Hold vote regarding recommendation at the SCICIPB
 - 4) Submit report to Itasca County Board and ask them to begin developing the County-wide Sanitary District and offering to provide assistance in finding grant sources and answering questions.

Itasca County will be responsible for the following steps. The SCICIPB will assist where appropriate.

- C. Meet with an attorney versed in this type of entity development and determine the process for forming the Sanitary District.
 - 1) Define process and develop a process scope of work with assistance from the attorney and ARDC
 - 2) Approve process
 - 3) Create budget
 - 4) Determine funding needs and sources

- D. Conduct entity development process (will include additional public input)
 - 1) Create entity
 - 2) Develop by-laws
 - 3) Develop Board
 - 4) Set initial fee system
 - i. Amount
 - ii. Locations (entire area or just hot spots)
 - iii. Collection system
- E. Conduct an initial inventory that assigns parcels with septic to the program
- F. Determine the inspection history of septic
- G. Create a reminder card program that would notify property owners that are due for inspections
- H. Development enforcement and incentive policies for homeowners that do not follow maintenance policies
- I. Develop a low-interest revolving loan program for low-income homeowners to use for replacement and repairs
- J. Create an education program for homeowners
- K. Contact certified inspectors and pumpers and notify them of the new program and training them in to submit paperwork to the County regarding the inspections/maintenance
- L. Receive and assemble information from inspectors to be stored in a database that records the history of individual septic
- M. Analyze septic records to identify “hot spots”-areas with multiple septic having issues that cannot be solved effectively with traditional septic
- N. Grant write to get funds for replacements
- O. Assist property owners to make decisions regarding septic installations, replacement, and repairs

Public Meeting Details

Meeting #1, Trout Lake Community Center (August 23, 2006)

Number of Attendees: 24

Summary of public comments: The reaction to the presentation was mixed with both positive and negative comments. The attendees agreed that “something” should be done, but were concerned about the cost of potential fees and the addition of a new government entity. Several attendees questioned why Itasca County isn’t already enforcing inspection rules since the state has made it a law and given the Counties the authority. A few attendees seemed to indicate that they would rather the County (or Township) took this issue on versus a new entity. Some attendees were supportive of a district, indicating that they believed it would result in less failing systems and pollution. People also expressed interest in keeping local control of the issue, rather than having the state step in with a blanket approach. *Overall, people were supportive of the idea of doing something, but would like to see the County take a stronger approach rather than create a local district, which people felt was another layer of government and fees.*

Actual comments from the public

1. This sucks!
2. Composting toilets help to eliminate wastewater.
3. There have been some composting toilet failures.
4. Setting aside property for future use would be a good idea.
5. How would the size of the district be determined?
6. Is there a statistic of the number of systems replaced?
7. We need to follow up on inspections and keep a record.
8. Laws need to be enforced.
9. Failing systems need to be identified.
10. Older systems are not necessarily failing.
11. There hasn’t been 3-year inspection enforcement because it was an unfunded mandate.
12. Dakota County can be used as an example.
13. How do we know if our system is compliant?
14. Another layer of government is unneeded.
15. No more fees!
16. A district is needed, but so is other funding.
17. Local control is important.
18. Are there opportunities for help with replacing failed systems?
19. County level management would be better.
20. The method of identifying failed systems is a failure.
21. Could an environmental trust fund be used?
22. Inspectors differ as far as what is compliant and what isn’t.
23. A cost comparison of a sanitary district and management at county level is necessary.
24. Straight pipes are now being fined.
25. Cluster systems should be looked into.

Meeting #2 Grand Rapids Area Library (August 26, 2006)

Number of attendees: 19

Summary of public comments: The reaction to the presentation was mostly positive, with one person being outspokenly against the idea, several being in favor of the idea, and several were undecided. Again, some attendees questioned why Itasca County isn't already enforcing inspection rules. Several attendees spoke in favor of the sanitary district idea, primarily stating their ideas that a district would help prevent lake pollution. *Overall, people were supportive of the idea of a sanitary district. Some people felt that another layer of government is unneeded. Others felt the County needs to be more proactive.*

Actual comments from the public

1. Straight pipes are now being fined.
2. Data on failed systems would be helpful.
3. What does failed mean?
4. Help identifying failed systems.
5. Why isn't the County enforcing existing rules?
6. The septic system guides are good, should be given to all new home owners and new septic owners.
7. Advertise the septic system guides.
8. Why not have countywide management?
9. I don't like fees; collect the money through taxes.
10. Are dye systems still being utilized?
11. This would be just another entity, why can't someone be employed under county control, although this can get very expensive.
12. Who should be enforcing the 3-year law, why isn't it being done.
13. Educating citizens is necessary.
14. Is there current state fees, what are they being used for?
15. Would a sanitary district board be a paid position?
16. The county should raise taxes for everyone who benefits from management or systems.
17. If the systems have an odor, we don't want them around the lakes.
18. Based on population density, not needed in rural areas.
19. Local control is better than nationwide.
20. Access funding is important.
21. A district is a good idea near Pokegama Lake.
22. Need to start now before the problems arise!
23. Keep money local for maintaining the lakes, otherwise if money goes to county or state, it may be spent somewhere else, the district would keep it here.
24. People don't know about taking care of their systems.
25. Lake Association has held these discussions for decades and done nothing.
26. We don't have much time.
27. Development versus redevelopment.
28. Inspectors are looked at as negative, they could help with education as well.
29. People are generally willing to respond to inspector's advice.
30. Be proactive/
31. Will this affect annexation?
32. Nonconforming lots could increase development with a big pipe.
33. Mounds- function better.

Meeting #3 Arbo Town Hall (September 13, 2006)

Number of attendees: 12

Summary of public comments: The discussion at this meeting was very good, with lots of points being made both for and against the idea of a sanitary district. Fees and government layers continued to be concerns. A lack of County activity on this issue was also discussed. Some attendees spoke in favor of a district, citing local control, increased enforcement, and the desire to keep the rural nature of the area. *Overall, people were open to the idea of increased management, but would want to learn more about fee size and enforcement power prior to fully supporting a district.*

Comments from the public

1. Why wouldn't a district be county-wide?
2. Who would pay for the administration of a sanitary district?
3. What is documentation associated with pumping?
4. Follow-up is needed.
5. Coordination with other state agencies is needed, especially the Department of Health.
6. The city does a good job, do we need more government?
7. Economics associated with enforcement and replacement.
8. There is a lack of checks and balances and follow-up.
9. Require pumpers to do the documentation.
10. Educational requirement.
11. Homeowners should take responsibility.
12. Try education and enforcement first without additional government and fees.
13. County needs employees dedicated to ISTS or even local governments (twp).
14. Adjust proposed boundaries; consider the entire county with sub-districts.
15. Consider economic development. Disparities/districts.
16. Encourage onsite systems within municipalities.
17. Keep it local.
18. Education and slow implementation.
19. Clusters managed by private enforcement.
20. Homeowners-type entities to coordinate and take care of problems.
21. OK to contribute to upgrades- slowly, a little money at a time.

Meeting #4 Cohasset Community Center (September 14, 2006)

Number of attendees: 20

Summary of public comments: Discussion was very good, with lots of different points being raised. People were generally favorable to the idea of management, with concerns being raised about a district's ability to help people with lower incomes pay for septic replacement. Again, questions were raised about having a County-wide district or smaller more-focused (on lakes) districts. People shared their concern about their lack of trust in the County to follow through on this issue and enforce rules despite the formation of a district or hiring another employee.

Overall, the attendees at this meeting were supportive of increased management, but had concerns about the size of the district and the district's ability to enforce rules any better than the County.

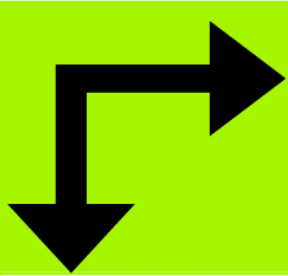
Comments from the public

1. Mandatory fee- What about those who cannot afford it? It's one more tax.
2. There are other approaches to gaining septic information; fly-over, survey, others?
3. Inspections: when and who would pay for them?
4. Zoning issues vs. Wastewater issues.
5. Another county employee- who's accountable?
6. We need consistency and enforcement of current laws on the books.
7. What are the options for low-income with problem septic.
8. \$25- where did that figure come from?
9. Increased services is a good thing.
10. Local control is good.
11. For responsible management of waste, a \$25 fee is cheap.
12. This would be another layer of government.

**SOUTH CENTRAL ITASCA COUNTY
WASTEWATER INITIATIVE TEAM**

INPUT WANTED ON SANITARY DISTRICT FORMATION

PUBLIC OUTREACH MEETINGS SCHEDULED



**WEDNESDAY,
AUGUST 23
TROUT LAKE
TOWN HALL
7 PM**

**SATURDAY,
AUGUST 26
GRAND RAPIDS
LIBRARY
10 AM**

**WEDNESDAY,
SEPTEMBER 13
ARBO TOWN
HALL
5 PM**

**THURSDAY,
SEPTEMBER 14
COHASSET
COMMUNITY
CENTER
7 PM**

**Andy Hubley, ARDC
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Duluth, MN 55802
218-529-7512
ahubley@ardc.org**

The South Central Itasca County Wastewater Initiative Team (I-Team) is seeking your input. Please attend one or more of the meetings listed to provide the I-Team with your thoughts on forming a Sanitary District for rural south central Itasca County.

A Sanitary District would conduct regular inspections of systems, provide routine maintenance, coordinate information, assist in the replacement of systems and accept grants on behalf of the residents.

For More Information on the project or the public meetings contact Andy Hubley with ARDC or go to

www.ardc.org/projects/itascawastewater.

The South Central Itasca County Wastewater Initiative Team is a program of the South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board.

Planning Board Staff: Rick Utech—218-326-9411 or rick@itascadv.org

Wastewater Initiative Team Staff: Andy Hubley—218-529-7512 or ahubley@ardc.org

Who Should Attend?

Residents using septic systems in:

- ◆ Grand Rapids
- ◆ Cohasset
- ◆ Harris
- ◆ Arbo
- ◆ Trout Lake
- ◆ Sugar Lake
- ◆ Bass Lake

What is the South Central Itasca County Intergovernmental Planning Board?

The mission on the Intergovernmental Planning Board is to enhance cooperation among member governmental units through the exchange of information, joint planning activities and the leverage of common resources.

The objective of the SCICIPB is to bring together representatives from units of government in the South Central Itasca County area to facilitate joint community-based land use and public facility planning within the member areas. The organization is comprised of units of government acting together under a joint planning district. Members discuss mutual problems and identify solutions, objectives and implementation strategies that will improve government efficiency and continuity. The members work together to develop regional priorities and plans for transportation, water and sewer extensions, housing, education, technology and zoning.

The SCICIPB encouraged a Wastewater Initiative Team in 2004. The Team includes local elected officials, technical experts, and other stakeholders to oversee the scoping process by determining data needs and assisting with data collection, evaluation, public involvement and community relations.

What is ARDC?

The Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (ARDC) is a multi-disciplined planning and development organization whose jurisdiction encompasses the Northeast Minnesota counties of Aitkin, Carlton, Cook, Itasca, Koochiching, Lake, and St. Louis.

In accordance with the Minnesota Regional Development Act, the Commission serves as an advocate for local governments in Northeast Minnesota, provides leadership in the development of projects that benefit the Arrowhead Region and serves as a catalyst to identify needs and seek solutions to issues of regional significance. This role is especially important with regard to problems and opportunities that are multi-jurisdictional in scope or impact. Throughout its existence, ARDC has developed numerous planning and implementation programs aimed at meeting the needs of the Arrowhead



ARDC also serves as an umbrella agency for a wide variety of local, state, and federal initiatives.

These programs include services to aging, human services, transit transportation, metropolitan planning, economic development, community development, and natural resources. Other responsibilities of ARDC include the development and maintenance of resource data to support the preparation of comprehensive development plans for units of government.

What is the University of Minnesota Extension Service?

University of Minnesota Extension Service provides many services to Minnesota. These services include community development and vitality that develops economic, social, civic, and technological capacities through research and education throughout the area. The Extension Service also focuses on the environment, through research, education, and outreach. This is to promote sustainable use of agriculture and natural resources, while looking to protect the environment now and in the future. Extension Service also focuses on youth development and family living.