

# Community Septic System Education Brief

## **Addendum: America's Water Supplies Are In Critical Danger**

*If you thought paying \$4.00 a gallon for gas was expensive, wait until you start paying \$10 to take a shower because your wells ran dry and are now getting your water delivered in a truck.*

In the early 1900's cities began drilling wells and tapping into their local aquifers to supply residents/businesses with water. The treatment facilities that serve these cities discharge into a river system that returns this water to the oceans. Two devastating problems with this process are now becoming apparent:

- Widespread pollution-Treatment facilities reduce, not eliminate contaminants in wastewater. Our coastal regions are now becoming toxic (including dead zones) where these river systems empty into the oceans.
- We are depleting our nation's water supplies-Cities are taking trillions of gallons of water out of their local aquifers every year and not recharging them. Part of the solution is onsite systems because they will not only treat wastewater better they also help recharge the local aquifers.

Since the Clean Water Act of 1972, millions of dollars have been set aside to deal with non-point pollution, however, very little of this money has been used for septic issues, primarily because homeowners and the local regulatory agencies have not been told about these resources **and** because most are waiting for the big-pipe; "Why fix septic systems today when they will eventually be hooking up to a treatment plant." Unfortunately the majority of these funds have been used to expand treatment facilities (to the benefit of developers). With the stimulus money, there will be even more funding available to expand the footprint of sewage treatment facilities which will increase our pollution and supply problems.

The true tragedy is we have become a reactive nation often ignoring the obvious until it reaches a crisis stage, then we pay to fix it, and our current economic situation is a perfect example. Many in Washington knew what was happening on Wall Street but ignored it. Now, even in the midst of a depression, taxpayers are bailing-out the companies that put us here.

Per this crisis: If homeowners are informed that a properly designed and operated onsite system will not only reduce pollution but also recharge/protect our water supplies (and there is financial assistance available) they will upgrade those septic systems. The catch is, people need to know this and the only way they will find it out is with educational programs because those that profit from the big-pipe sure aren't going to tell them...this is your chance to make a real difference for our future.

**Up to this point the majority** of the educational process [per septic systems] has been directed at contractors on how to design and install proper systems, yet very little has been done about educating the homeowners how to properly use those septic systems. Even the best system will fail if used improperly.

In 1995, Ken Olson of the University of Minnesota Extension Service started a community education program for homeowners in the Twin Cities metro area. Follow-up studies have shown virtually 100% of the people that attend these classes make changes in their life-styles to protect their systems and a large percentage voluntarily replace/repair their failing systems. Requests from small communities outside the metro area and in other states proved the nation-wide need for this educational process.

Having worked with the Extension Service on various educational programs, I volunteered to take this a step further by working with Health Depts. and communities performing these classes in other parts of the country. These agencies/groups welcome the help and have said this [educational process] is long over-due. Many have also stated homeowners seem to listen to an outside source more readily than a local source.

These 2-hour classes teach homeowners the health, environmental and financial damages failing septic systems have caused, what a proper system is, and how to use and maintain those systems. Because of the number of questions from the audience these classes run 2½-3 hours.

The need and support for this education is obvious. Many have stated waiting [years] for individual states and communities to organize and implement these programs would be counterproductive, financially devastating, and an un-necessary source of environmental damage. A common statement homeowners make is, "This is so simple. Why didn't someone tell me this before my system failed?"

And these damages are going to dramatically increase with the many new styles of septic systems that are being used extensively all over the country. Although they are excellent treatment systems, many are fragile and are failing in 3-5 years under real life settings. Entire developments are finding this out the hard way. There are however, steps homeowners can take to prevent these failures, if they are made aware of them.

To prove their value these classes are being performed for expenses only. These classes are inexpensive and extremely effective. Many are now repeat appearances and/or have been used as a "train the trainer" template for on-going local educational programs.

For more information contact James vonMeier, 1-763-856-3800.

# SEPTIC SYSTEM EDUCATIONAL CLASSES

**When homeowners learn** the environmental damages caused by failing and inadequate septic systems they shake their heads and say, "Gee that's a shame." However when they learn **they** may be drinking today what they had for dinner last night **and** how failing septic systems can drive down their property values, the problem just got personalized. **Their** health and pocketbook can be affected. This will motivate them to get their systems fixed.

**When you teach those homeowners how to properly use those systems** (and dispel the myths) the systems stop failing and the resulting damages [from failing systems] are dramatically reduced without cost to the city, county or state because the homeowner replace their failing system on their own. Zoning officials have noticed a rush for up-grade permits following these classes.

**This method of communicating information** continues being transmitted throughout neighborhoods. For example, when a homeowner learns the true facts on septic systems, they will voluntarily share this new found knowledge with their neighbors, because after all, the only thing worst than having a failed septic system is living next-door to one.

## **The format of these 2-hour classes is:**

- The health and environmental danger failing, inadequate and outdated onsite systems pose.
- Why failing septic systems have been an on-going source of health and environmental damages yet ignored by most.
- How septic systems have evolved over the last 40 years and why a properly designed, installed and maintained system **can** be a better environmental and financial choice than most sewage treatment plants.
- How they operate, what causes them to fail and how to prevent a failure.
- The importance of homeowners being proactive at upgrading/maintaining their systems, low-cost funding methods and annual maintenance programs.
- Questions and answers. The contact person should be available to participate.

## **Suggested steps:**

**LOCATE SITE(S)**-City Halls, community centers, libraries, or schools with capacity for 30 to 300+.

**IDENTIFY COSTS**-These seminars are performed as a non-profit public service. Expenses are minimized by performing classes in 2, 3 or 4 nearby communities on consecutive nights so networking with neighboring communities is advised. Cost per class is usually \$200-\$400, well within the budgets of most agencies.

**Schedule classes**-Avoid conflicts with other scheduled events. Evenings are usually the most convenient.

**IDENTIFY LOCAL MEDIA AND ISSUE PRESS RELEASES**- Local papers, radio and television stations will run these announcements free of charge. Many media sources will also do a news story on septic systems. Local contacts should be available as expert interview subjects. Send out community newsletters and information to local schools to be sent home with children. A contact number is advised to gauge the number of people that will be attending.

## **INSTITUTING CLASSES**

In many cases it is a concerned homeowner that learns about these seminars and initiates the process. The local agency responsible for septic systems or a city council member is then contacted and presented this information. Now comes the hard part, convincing them to try it.

Although some do recognize the value of such a program and agree to put one on, others will voice objections like, "I don't have the time to do it" and/or "People are not going to attend a class to learn about septic systems." This is the most frustrating part of this process, those that are unwilling to try something new.

These classes are designed to take a minimal amount of time on the part of local personnel, often requiring only a few hours to assign a location and getting a media list. As far as people not attending, there have been occasions where we have had to make a last minute change to a larger auditorium because the anticipated number of attendees swelled from a few dozen to a few hundred.

The fact is septic systems are one of the most misunderstood components of a home. Homeowners are now realizing this and want/need to learn more about them, but until now there have been very few places to turn. And a harsh reality is, many homeowners are hesitant to contact local authorities fearing if they do have a faulty system they will be forced into an expensive and immediate up-grade.

However if you offer this information in an anonymous group setting they will come. Show them how a bad system is a health and financial risk for them/their families, they will fix those bad systems on their own. Show them how to use those now proper systems and they quit failing. Problem solved.

## **BILLING PROCEDURE**

These classes are (currently) being performed for travel expenses only, airfare, hotel and car rental fees. In areas where 2, 3 or 4 classes can be scheduled the costs per community will typically range \$200 to \$400.

After the trip these expenses are totaled and an invoice is sent to each community contact indicating their share. It is then up to that department to decide on the amount to be paid. If they do not feel the class was beneficial to their community, they are under no obligation to pay anything. However I am happy to say they do see the benefits (with many homeowner's voluntarily ordering inspections and up-grades) and several communities pay extra to insure future programs.

## TIPS FOR SETTING UP A SUCCESSFUL SEMINAR

These classes can be extremely effective at getting people to repair, upgrade and maintain their onsite systems however there is a formula that increases their success...and with many components you only get one chance. For example:

- Pick the right time-Some have scheduled sessions during the day when most homeowners are at work and few are willing to take a day off to attend a poop workshop. Another mistake is putting them on against other popular events, like local high school football playoffs. Likewise in seasonal areas when the resident population drops. This guarantees a low turnout. Pick your times wisely to reach as many people as you can.
- The location-The best locations are easy to find and people will feel comfortable in. If you have a community that is at odds with the city (perhaps over septic issues) city hall may not be the best place to hold it because some may see it as a government sponsored pocket-picking expedition and refuse to attend. A hotel conference center may also seem too commercial. A location that is hard to find can cause problems. In cases like this a centrally located school or library may be a better option.
- Advertising-Television, radio and print will often run free announcements and can get better results than paid ads but you can not just fax an announcement and expect them to run it; you need to call each outlet and get through to the person in charge of their PSA's (public service announcements). Give them a brief explanation of the free seminar(s) you are putting on and ask if they could tell their audience and if they prefer fax or email. Next you need to follow-up with them...these are freebies so they are not a priority and until you get a firm commitment on when and how often they will run them you need to stay on top of it. They are doing you a favor so don't be rude or a pest, but be persistent.
- Bonus news stories-Often you can get the local media to do an in-depth story on septic systems however you need to understand what the media wants to see; death, danger, controversy. In the news if it bleeds it leads and that's what sells...not boring mundane topics. To get a reporter to do a story you need to convince them there **is a story** by giving them a hook. In some areas the hook may be the danger of old cesspools/septic tanks caving-in putting residents at risk. It may be the contamination of our drinking and recreational waters. Or it could be the expense/controversy of building a sewage treatment facility and who really benefits (developers) and who suffers (the environment and the public that fund these projects).

Most media outlets have a consumer or environmental reporter; approach the most popular first. Small outlets will report on anything but they don't have the coverage so no one will see it and big reporters often want exclusivity; if you are already working with their competition guaranteed they will pass on the story. Hit the big ones first and work your way down.

Keep in mind reporters are working on several stories at a time so you will often need to leave a **short** phone or email message stating you have a potential story for them per the environment, danger, taxes (whatever hook you are using). Leave a callback number and keep trying to get through to them (but don't keep leaving messages because again you do not want to be a pest). This can take a week or more so don't wait until a few days before the seminars, start well in advance.

When you do talk to them, give a quick verbal explanation and offer to email them a prepared one-page synopsis outlining the problems and solutions. \*Conclude with interview subjects/location shots available. Ask when you can talk to answer questions and if they have an interest in the story. This is considered non-breaking news and they will pass if it sounds dull. That's why your pitch must sound like critical information their audience needs to know **immediately** and you are offering it to them first. If they won't commit within a week, move on to your next choice.

\*Usually reporters are only allowed a few hours of actual time in the field to get cover shots and those visuals (photos/video) **are the story** so you must have examples. Call local contractors to find those examples and ask if they can hold-off repairs for the news. Tell them it means free advertizing for them. Convince property owners to tell their horror stories. Health/zoning officials should be available as well. Hand them something easy to write and produce and they will be more inclined to do it.

When it comes to the actual classes it would be in your best interest seeing how others perform them to give you an idea what people are going to ask and expect. I have learned to start out with video news stories showing death in cesspools/septic tanks and failing systems. That gets their attention. I then use statistics of environmental/health damages so they realize this is not an isolated problem and they could be living with it.

**However I then point-out these problems are coming from older, noncompliant systems and emphasize modern systems can be safer (and far cheaper) than the big pipe which gets them to act.**

Unfortunately I have seen these suggestions ignored resulting in poorly attended/received sessions and why some believe education is ineffective.

However by using these tips you can increase the chances of a good turn out and response. And with a successful program the word will get around encouraging others to attend your future classes.



Village of  
  
Germantown  
... Willkommen

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Germantown, Wisconsin 53022-0337  
Phones: (414) 253-8250 or 677-2177 FAX (414) 253-8255

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Mr. James VonMeier  
14622 268 Avenue  
Zimmerman, MN 55398

Dear Jim:

On behalf of the Village of Germantown and our residents, we would like to thank you for the educational and informative septic system presentation you gave to the community.

Despite the inclement weather, the attendance was testimony to the need for educating the public on their septic systems. Due to the demonstrated interest and the needed component of ongoing education, we would like to have you back in the summer as a follow-up to your earlier presentation. Hopefully, a visit to Germantown will coincide with other classes in the area. We can probably assure you that the weather will be better.

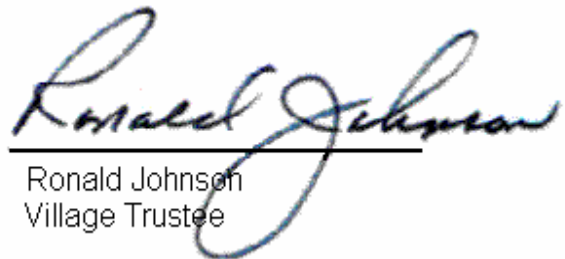
Once again, we greatly appreciate your time and the information you were able to provide to our residents.

Thank you.

Very truly yours,



Thomas Kempinski  
Village Trustee



Ronald Johnson  
Village Trustee

cc: Charles J. Hargan, Village President Paul E Brandenburg, Village Administrator



## New Jersey Coalition of Lake Associations

a chapter of North American Lake Management Society

Mr. James vonMeier  
14622 268th Avenue  
Zimmerman, MN 55398

Dear Jim,

On behalf of the members of the New Jersey Coalition of Lake Associations and the members of Lake Mohawk Country Club, we would like to thank you for coming to New Jersey to speak before our groups. You certainly have an art in making a rather unmentionable subject extremely interesting, informative, and even humorous.

Our Lake Fair was a huge success. It was very rewarding to see more than 250 people turn out to be educated on what they could do to improve their lake. It was particularly interesting to see how many people were sincerely interested in the subject of septic systems, which is not exactly the usual topic of conversation. You, as keynote speaker for the program did an excellent job in continuing and enhancing the educational process we have started here at Lake Mohawk. The program you presented was outstanding. It contained so much new information, and it was amazing how much the audience just wanted to hear more and more. We have had many requests for information about your educational programs, which we continue to distribute.

We also want to congratulate you on the excellent job you did at Sparta High School. I had a call from Ginger Nathanson, Head of the Science Department, and she was very excited about your program and felt that you really captured the interest of the young people.

Jim, it was a pleasure working with you. On behalf of Lake Mohawk Country Club, and all who participated in the program, we thank you for all of your efforts and sharing your knowledge with us. We do look forward to bringing you back to New Jersey for an encore.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Frances Smith'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Frances Smith-COLA President



## Hilltown Community Development Corporation

Main Office: P.O. Box 17, 432A Main Road, Chesterfield, MA 01012-0017

Phone 413-296-4536 • Fax 413-296-4020 E-MAIL: HCDC@external.umass.edu

Satellite Office: P.O. Box 113, 9 Russell Road, Huntington, MA 01050 • Phone 413-667-5204

May 4, 1998

Mr. James von Meier  
14622 268 Avenue  
Zimmerman, MN 55398

Dear Jim:

On behalf Hilltown residents, I would like to thank you for the informative educational septic presentation which you provided in Chesterfield on April 16, 1998.

As a non-profit agency established to address the needs of ten rural towns, most of which rely exclusively on private septic systems and drinking water supplies, I was pleased that your presentation addressed so many of the issues of concern to residents, young and old alike. I saw many people busily writing notes during your presentation, and since that evening, I have fielded several phone calls following up on septic repair and maintenance procedures. Wastewater treatment is indeed a subject which concerns all of us, but which is understood by few. Your educational class is a great tool for bringing an "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" subject to the forefront in a simple, understandable format.

Thank you again for your time and effort in coming to our rural region. It was greatly appreciated by all.

Sincerely,

Bea von Hagke  
Housing Rehab. Program Manager



## WESTPORT RIVER WATERSHED ALLIANCE

1151 MAIN ROAD, P.O. BOX 3427, WESTPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 02790-0703  
Telephone: (508) 636-3016 Fax: (508) 636-8884  
E-Mail: wrwamass@aol.com

June 19, 2000

Gay Gillespie  
*Executive Director*

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Jim vonMeier  
14622 268<sup>th</sup> Ave.  
Zimmerman, MN 55398

Dear Jim:

On behalf of the Westport River Watershed Alliance, the Westport Board of Health, and the Westport community, I want to thank you for visiting our area and speaking about proper septic tank/leach field maintenance. It was extremely informative and your video, accompanied with overheads, was descriptive and understandable.

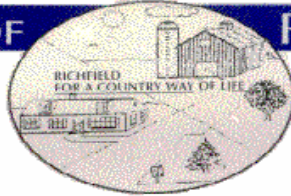
It was especially interesting to realize that maintaining one's septic system is so much more economical than the annual expense of being hooked into a public sewer system! Too, I had no idea about the positive effects of a laundry filter or baffle filter to keep synthetic fibers out of the system. As you know, the audience found it very helpful and interesting as witnessed by the time they stayed to speak to you after the talk.

Area pumpers have expressed their positive comments. The constructive criticism that has been offered is to have an additional speaker on Massachusetts' Title V so that he/she could address specific issues here in our state.

Again, it was a pleasure to have you come. I do hope you will let me know if you are planning to come this way again, so that we might sponsor another evening lecture with you as guest speaker. You did a terrific job.

All the best,

Gay Gillespie  
Executive Director



June 22, 1999

Mr. James von Meier  
14622 268th Ave.

Zimmerman, MN 55398

Re: Septic System Educational Class on May 18, 1999

Dear Mr. Von Meier,

Your presentation about the use and function of private septic systems last Wednesday evening, was, like last year, educational, informative and appreciated by the seventy-five (75) residents in attendance. I have noted that your class generated positive discussions throughout the community during the past week!

You left a better impression with people that private septic systems serve a necessary purpose as a part of the development of Richfield.

On behalf of the Town Chairman, Town Board and Richfield residents, I would like to thank you for the benefit you have provided our community. How about a county-wide workshop next year?

In order to accommodate your travel and expenses, we have included a stipend of \$250.00.

Sincerely yours,

Jerry A. O'Connor  
Town Administrator

JAO/mam

# *Certificate of Appreciation*

Awarded to:

**James VonMeier**

Thank you for your outstanding presentation  
at our community septic education class!

8/1/01

Date



A blue ink signature of DuWayne Konewko.

Signed

DuWayne Konewko,  
Environmental Services Director