



Devils Lake Water Improvement District  
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## **Septic Tank Revitalization Program (Initiated Fall 2009):**

### **Summary**

The Devils Lake watershed has been densely developed in the last 100 years. There are currently over 400 homes within 250 feet of the shoreline. Due to the nature of the development and the landscape the vast majority of these homes utilize onsite waste management systems or septic systems. While under working order, septic tanks are a reasonable tool for treating domestic wastewater that is not however true with failed systems, with systems that are placed in places lacking the right soil conditions, or that are set below the water table. In addition, aging and poorly maintained septic tanks and drain fields can be a major contributor of nutrients in the watershed. While other sources of nutrients exist, this is one item humans (lake residents, property owners and District residents) can have a direct impact on. Identification and revitalization of septic systems thus was established as the number one priority in the Devils Lake Plan in August of 2008.

Key to identifying failing septic systems is conducting inspections. While certain properties going through real estate transactions maybe required to ensure that an adequate septic system exists, many septic tanks have for decades gone without inspection. Voluntary inspections while potentially a preferred method of identify and restoring systems often fails to identify the worst of the failed systems. Being that, a mandatory septic tank inspection requirement is being proposed for properties receiving municipal water.

### **FAQ?**

#### **What is being proposed?**

For a detailed understanding of what the City of Lincoln City has proposed please review the City Manager's Memo to the City Council and a supplemental letter to the Devils Lake Water Improvement District. However, the crux of the proposal is to require an inspection of existing properties abutting Devils Lake, or its tributaries, that receive municipal water (See Map).

Continued water service would be contingent on property owners obtaining the one-time inspection within the proposed 5-year timeline. The City's proposal is only for an inspection, not for mandatory repairs as this is the purview of Lincoln County's Onsite Waste program. Water service would thus not be terminated for properties receiving an inspection regardless if the systems were functioning adequately or not.

### **What are the inspection criteria?**

Existing systems will only have to meet the criteria that were established at the time they were built. Therefore if a system was built before tank sizes were regulated for instance, that system would be judged not on tank size, but whether the system is still operating and is not leaking or releasing untreated effluent. Fundamental in Oregon Law is that systems must not be causing a public health hazard, nor be polluting the groundwater or waters of the state. For detailed information about inspections and for rules governing septic systems contact the Onsite Programs run by [Lincoln County](#) and [Oregon DEQ](#).

### **What if my system fails the inspection?**

Existing state law requires that property owners properly maintain a functioning system. Therefore nothing in this proposal would create anything new regarding current repair requirements, and as stated previously a property's water would not be shut off as a result of a failed system. However, as is the case with any failed system, state law would require that the systems be brought up to current code. This would be worked out between Lincoln County, who run the onsite program on behalf of the State of Oregon, and the property owner. The staff in Newport are very informative and helpful and will guide the property owner through the process to a successful revitalization, as necessary.

### **Why not sewer the lake instead of revitalizing septic systems?**

Numerous studies have been conducted on sewerage the lake, and it has basically come down to two things...time and money! The topography of the lake shore would require many additional, expensive pump stations, not to mention the infrastructure costs of putting in miles of additional sewer lines. These costs would generally be absorbed by the property owners who would then become hooked up to the sanitary sewer. This is a multi-million dollar investment which would then result in significantly higher taxes for the properties involved. Smaller scaled approaches have also been considered. The City of Lincoln City has devoted many hours of staff time in trying to hook up groups of properties through Local Improvement Districts (LIDs) where the sewer extension would be a relatively short distance. While many homeowners may initially be in favor of such an LID, when faced with the actual cost of approximately \$15,000-\$25,000 per property, negotiations have generally failed. Through its efforts, the City of Lincoln City has been only able to get five additional properties off septic tanks. Thus given the cost and time associated with small or large scale sewer infrastructure, the City Manager has suggested that a project of this magnitude is 20 years out on the horizon, at best. Therefore given the life of an average septic system, even if in 20 years there was a sewer around the lake, a septic system on a new house built

in 2005 would be nearing or have passed its useful life. This is not to mention the many hundreds of homes of which were established decades ago, which makes this current endeavor of this Septic Tank Revitalization Program even more of an issue. For a summary of the current database of septic tanks around the lake, [click here](#).