

Riverkeeper stumps for septic upgrades

By CRAIG O'DONNELL
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CHESTERTOWN — Nitrogen-removing septic systems can go a long way to minimize how much of the nutrient eventually makes it way to the Chesapeake Bay, according to Tom Leigh.

The Chester Riverkeeper spoke to Commissioners Roy Crow, William Pickrum and Ron Fithian Tuesday. More than a dozen clean water supporters attended. The Chester River Association is pressing for the county to require upgraded septic systems for every dwelling in the Critical Area.

Currently, the state offers a free upgrade and five years' maintenance through grants from the Bay Restoration Fund.

"Is your home septic system helping to restore the Chester River?" Leigh asked. "If you don't have a BNR septic system, the answer is no."

The term stands for "biological nutrient reduction," a way of upgrading the traditional septic system to remove some of the nitrogen from waste; a traditional septic system removes no nitrogen.

Mayor Margo Bailey and Sassafras Riverkeeper Kascie Herron each sent a letter of support, and after his PowerPoint presentation, John Vail of the Sassafras River Association said,

"We support the CRA's proposal." Vail said local organizations also look forward to working with the commissioners on "waste disposal as a big picture."

John Seidel, speaking for the Washington College Center for Environment and Society, commented, "We support this ... we are really concerned" about the effects of inaction. Up-to-date statistics apparently are hard to find, but Leigh said as of 2000, Kent County had 4,500 total septic systems with 2,000 in the critical area, within 1,000 feet of the shoreline. More than half of the county's residents use on-site septic.

Based on those figures, he said, each year county septic systems put out 23 times more nitrogen than Chestertown's state-of-the-art wastewater plant; and nitrogen from septic is the fastest-growing source of the nutrient in the Chester River watershed.

Water and Wastewater Services Director Wayne Morris said 600-some Kent County homes have been taken off septic systems since 2000. But other septic systems proliferated as a building boom went sprawling across rural Queen Anne's County during much of the last decade.

Crow said he would "give you all a little history," and told Leigh about past efforts to connect areas such as Tolchester, Piney Neck, Green Lane

and Edesville to sewer systems.

Pickrum said he supports BNR systems "in new construction no matter where it is in the county."

Fithian said he supports them as long as the state makes grant money available, and that there are places where septic upgrades make more sense than sewer lines.

Crow said it is preferable to serve developments in the critical area that predate the critical area laws, like Kinnaird's Point and Kentmore Park, with sewer lines. "To mandate (septic upgrades) — is it necessary?"

An audience member asked where the county's map for the long-range plan is. Crow said, "The plan is as we go along" putting in sewer lines to fix failed septic systems.

Also, there was a hearing Tuesday to amend the Comprehensive Water and Sewerage Plan. Rather than a shared sanitary facility to serve 12 lots owned by Lawrence and Associates Developers LLC and up to 16 failing septic systems along Lovers Lane in Quaker Neck, the plan is to extend a sewer main connecting to the Chestertown treatment plant.

The denied-access line serves only specified parcels. Allocations were granted to the county by Chestertown. There were 17 failing septic systems on Lovers Lane found by the health department nine years ago; one has been connected to a

sewer line, and another can probably be fixed on-site, said Water and Wastewater Services Director Wayne Morris.

No one from the public signed up to testify, although there were comments of a general nature from several people.

In a letter, Herron asked if the county would assist with the Sassafras Watershed Action Plan with information that the Planning Office has.

The computerized mapping data consists of planimetric data, topographic data; zoning maps showing planned growth areas; and parcel outline map data. The commissioners said they were concerned about staff spending time on such projects.

"You have an office that has been increased by one person in the last 17 years," said County Administrator Susie Hayman.

"The data takes about 30 minutes to put on CD," said planner Carla Martin.

"There may be issues with proprietary data," Hayman said.

Herron also asked for help of any kind with a mass mailing to watershed residents for permission to cross their property during the Stream Corridor Assessment portion of the plan.

The commissioners said they don't want to set a precedent by paying postage.