

Chester River Association outlines legislative agenda

By JACK SHAMM
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CHESTERTOWN — It's still six weeks until the 2011 session of the Maryland General Assembly convenes, but the Chester River Association already has most of its legislative agenda in hand.

The organization, which advocates for the Chester River and those that live within its 390-square-mile watershed in Queen Anne's and Kent counties, wants to see better septic systems, increased fees for violations within Critical Areas and incentives for the creation of energy from biofuels.

The centerpiece of the CRA's Annapolis agenda is the passage of legislation requiring all new homes in Maryland to have so-called "best available technology" septic systems. These would be Biological Nutrient Removal (BNR) systems capable of removing nitrogen from wastewater.

Two years ago, the CRA successfully backed legislation requiring

all new homes and failing septic systems in Critical Areas near local waters to upgrade to BNR systems.

"All we're saying is finish the job you started," said CRA Executive Director Bob Parks, who added that projections show many more septic systems coming on line in Maryland in the future.

In the next 10 years, he said, 263,225 new households will appear and 29 percent of them will have septic systems. He said estimates have shown that each septic system produces 18 pounds of nitrogen, which would mean about 1.3 million pounds statewide.

"We see this as very important legislation," said Tom Leigh, who was Chester Riverkeeper when the legislative package was put together and who begins work today, Dec. 1, as the Miles/Wye Riverkeeper. The new Chester Riverkeeper, who also begins today, is Jason Peters.

Another element of the CRA legislative package, Parks said, is a move to increase certain fines and

permit fees of the Maryland Department of the Environment.

"They ought to be higher for critical area violations," Parks said of the proposal to boost MDE fines in that area from the current \$500. A proposed new amount has not yet been decided upon.

He said the revenue from the increased fines and permit fees could go toward hiring more MDE inspectors to keep on top of and prevent Critical Area violations.

Also part of the legislative package is an initiative to again try to create incentives for farmers to produce electricity using biofuels such as locally-grown switchgrass. Similar legislative last year died in committee, Parks said. The CRA believes the bad economy contributed to the bill's failure.

If such legislation is approved facilities would be built to convert biofuels into viable energy sources and it would also benefit farmers who grow such things as switchgrass. Switchgrass also has environmental benefits when it comes to water quality, the CRA said.

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