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## Septic vs. sewer

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LAKE LUZERNE — Bringing a sewer system to Lake Luzerne is flush with problems.

Like many rural lake communities, the town of 3,219 doesn't have a sewer system. Instead, residents and businesses have individual septic tanks that occasionally need to be pumped to remove built-up waste.

The only problem, said Town Supervisor Gene Merlino, is that some folks who live near the lake



DEREK PRUITT - dpruitt@poststar.com  
 Residences sit along the shore of Lake Luzerne Nov. 30. Town officials and environmentalists are concerned septic systems around the lake aren't being maintained adequately to ensure water quality.

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might not maintain their systems.

More than 100 homes and cottages dot the landscape, many stacked practically on top of one another and obscured by trees.

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They range from modest campsites to larger, newer homes.

"Ten to 15 years ago, Grandma and Grandpa stayed in the cabin, and that was OK for them," Merlino said. "But now, the next generation that was handed down these homes, they have three kids, so it taxes most of these little, small rural cottages along our lake system."

In many ways, septic tanks that are old or have fallen into disrepair are a good example of why the town needs to construct a sewer system, according to town officials and business owners.

Tanks that fail or overflow can wreak environmental chaos on nearby water sources, which would affect a lake-oriented community all the more. But the cash for a sewer project isn't there.

#### Few use low-cost cleanout

Earlier this year, the town tried to entice some property owners to clean out and repair their tanks.

While it's a costly procedure — the price varies depending on the age, design and amount of material in the tank — cleaning the tank is vital to the surrounding environment.

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the Warren County Soil and Water Conservation District had offered to check out individual septic tanks, offer maintenance tips and even clean some of them.

The program, which was funded by a \$15,000 grant, would give tank owners a discount if maintenance was needed. The program didn't make much of a dent. Of the 100 or so property owners on the lake, only 14 people took advantage, Verlin said.

"I was a little disappointed in the participation but it's a start," he said. "I want to see if we can promote it a little bit more. But you can't just walk on people's property and check their septic tanks."

David Wick, a manager with the conservation district, said it's an awkward proposition to help clean and inspect a tank.

Most people who haven't had maintenance on their tanks in recent years are either embarrassed by the state of the tanks or worried they could be fined.

"The only easy way to do this on a mass effort is to do this in a non-threatening way," Wick said. "It's a very touchy situation."

Maintaining a septic system, no matter how messy, is very important, according to environmental scientists. In a properly operating septic system, the waste goes into the ground, where micro-organisms take care of it, said Larry Eichler, a research scientist with the Darrin Freshwater Institute at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

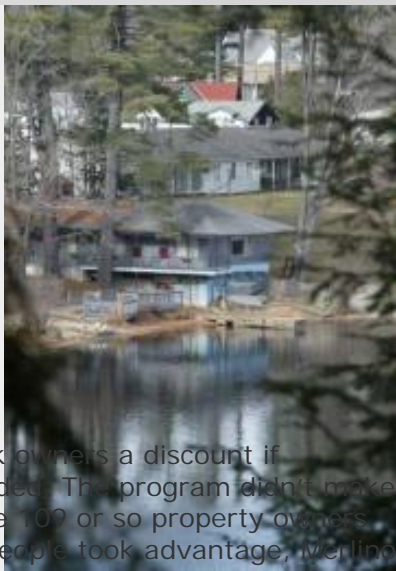
"But in a septic system that's either not been properly maintained, such that it fills up with solids, or a failing one with pressure on pipes — the leaking material can just run off directly to the lake."

Eichler said it wouldn't be surprising if at least parts of the lake had low-level pollution from septic runoff.

"There are a number of older homes around the lake with septic systems," he said.

"For the most part, they don't upgrade them. So they're simply working with what they have when the camp was built.

"I think the problems are real." Art Havighorst, the



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president of the lake's homeowners association, said some of the residents who live in and around the lake are perhaps not used to having a septic system.

"Especially in a town like Lake Luzerne, where you have part-time residents, many are coming from towns with sewers," he said.

"If you bought the house in the last five years, you may not even realize what that entails."

Havighorst said the association has in recent years tried to inform residents about proper septic care.

"It really is the homeowner's responsibility, but it affects everybody when their septic system fails," he said. "To that degree, people need to be more aware of the maintenance obligations and what they should be doing."

### **Testing for pollution**

The water from Lake Luzerne eventually seeps into the Hudson River, which in turn becomes drinking water for Queensbury residents.

A January study by C.T. Male Associates, a Latham-based construction company, warned that failing septic systems could affect the water source's quality.

"Inadequacies in some of these systems due to high bedrock and insufficient area for leach fields has, through the years, resulted in direct discharges of raw and partially treated sewage to the Hudson River," according to the report. But officials in Queensbury aren't worried about any impurities being flushed their way.

"It would not impact our water supply," said Bruce Ostrander, the Queensbury water commissioner.

"Generally there is E. coli in the Hudson River anyway. It's such a high volume of water, I doubt it would increase the concentration levels."

Merlino, the Lake Luzerne supervisor, said pollution isn't a concern.

"It could be five out of a hundred (people who have problems with their tanks)," he said. "There's no way to tell. I don't want to make it look like a doomsday problem for the lake, because it's not." Inspectors, testing the lake in the last year, found little evidence of tanks seeping into the water.

### **Sewer too expensive**

Still, town officials want to modernize the town and install a new sewer system.

But after years of planning and at least three costly

studies, town officials concluded that construction would be too expensive for local taxpayers to bear.

The C.T. Male Associates plan would have connected hundreds of homes in the town and part of nearby Hadley. Most studies pin the cost at about \$13.5 million to hook the entire town of 1,900 or so homes up to a sewer system. To connect the lake area alone to a sewer system would cost about \$7 million.

"Nobody wants to talk about it," said Mike Parwana, the owner of Chicken Coop Forge, a blacksmith shop in Lake Luzerne. "They want to keep taxes down.

"Meanwhile, the town's dying. There's no money for an essential governmental responsibility — making sure the town has adequate sewage."

Merlino, too, is frustrated that the project has stalled.

"Three studies on them all came back that we just can't afford (not to implement a sewer system)," he said "The town cannot. The taxpayers cannot."

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**frank1** wrote on *Dec 3, 2007 10:25 PM:*

" People will not spend the money until after there is a problem. End of story. "

**KJHfarm** wrote on *Dec 3, 2007 2:00 PM:*

" It is a shame that in 2007 we have towns with real people that do not have a public sewer system especially when you have major roads going through the town. The costs will

keep on going up. Shape up and build NOW. If you are out in the country and have several acres obviously a septic system will do , just get rid of all the nutty state regulations in that instance. The cost of building a septic system is making contractors and engineers rich at the expense of the general public. There should be different rules for a 1/2 acre lot and a 5 acre lot or anything in between. KJH Farm "

**INTERESTED READER** wrote on *Dec 3, 2007*  
1:40 PM:

" There are septic systems failing all over the place in this environmentally sensitive area. Lake George, Lake Luzerne, Glen Lake and others. The state of New York is quick to regulate in the Adirondack Park, but slow to come up with the dollars to help small communities such as Lake George and Luzerne put in sewer systems that would help protect the water shed. NY State needs to get on the ball!! "

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