

An Update on Septic Systems

Bob Bower, ACC Chair

Beginning in January 2020, Natural Resource Services of Bernalillo County sent letters to County residents regarding inspection and permitting of all septic systems older than 35 years. Referring to Wastewater Ordinance 2014-17, the letters state that if your system was installed before 1/1/1985 and has not had an inspection by a qualified septic contractor within the last five years, you are required to have the system inspected by 12/31/2020. A list of eleven wastewater system evaluators is attached to these letters. Here in Sandia Heights, we have over 2200 properties and my best guess is that about half of these properties have septic systems.

Let's look at some scenarios. If you have your system inspected and all parts are functioning properly, the evaluator will submit the paperwork to the County. The County will review the evaluation and will issue a Wastewater Evaluation Permit if they agree with the evaluator's findings. The County will send you the original copy of this permit which will have an expiration date of five years from the date the permit was issued.

The next scenario is more complicated. If part or all of your system fails, the evaluation paperwork will describe the nature of the failure and no permit will be issued. The County will send you a letter describing the next steps. Typically, the County will impose a 30-day deadline to get the system repaired or replaced but is willing to negotiate with you if that deadline will not work. Once fully repaired, the system must again be evaluated, and the paperwork sent to the County. If the evaluation is acceptable, a permit will be issued to you.

Some additional thoughts:

1. Don't ignore these letters if you get one. The County has some not-too-pleasant ways to deal with residents who ignore their letter. Since septic systems, particularly older ones, have been identified as a main source of groundwater contamination, the County's objective with these inspections is to ensure the protection of public health and the environment.
2. Due to the potential for conflict of interest, the Ordinance allows residents to contract directly with a qualified provider of their choosing—there is no requirement to select from the County's list. There is also no requirement to use a provider from the County's list to perform any repairs.
3. I wrote a GRIT article in August 2019 on basic tips to help keep your septic system functioning efficiently. This GRIT edition is available on the SHHA website.
4. The permit for your septic system is not transferable. The permit will expire when the owner sells the property or when the tenant or occupancy classification changes. A new permit must be obtained within 30 days of the property being transferred/sold or a change in the tenancy or occupancy classification.
5. My advice is to have your system inspected at the same time that you have it pumped. The cost for both of these actions when done in tandem is around \$400–\$500. If you have had your system evaluated in the past five years, the County will accept the evaluation.
6. Beginning in January 2021, these letters will require systems installed before 1/1/1986 to be inspected prior to 12/31/2021.