

Properly designed and installed sewage disposal systems function better and longer with proper maintenance. Without maintenance, systems may fail over time; neutralizing the efforts and resources devoted by a municipality to assure proper design and installation of these systems. Municipal sewage management programs can vary from a simple pumping program to a more complex municipal inspection program. Municipalities should consider selecting an appropriate method based on their specific needs and the resources available. It is the responsibility of the municipality to select the appropriate management program.

Only in cases where sewage malfunctions are widespread in an area and endanger public health will DEP consider requiring a municipality to adopt a sewage management program. Even in those cases, however, DEP will not specify which management program the municipality must select.


Sewage management programs can be very cost effective. When a management program is in place, homeowners may avoid the costs of repairing or replacing malfunctioning systems, and municipalities may avoid the costs of having to extend sewer lines great distances when malfunctioning on-lot systems leave the municipality with no other alternatives.

Available Information From DEP

- The Sewage Facilities Act (Act 537)
- Regulations
 - Chapter 71, Administration of Sewage Facilities Planning Program
 - Chapter 72, Administration of Sewage Facilities Permitting Program
 - Chapter 73, Standards for Sewage Disposal Facilities
- Consumers Guide to On-Lot Sewage System Permits
- Consumers Guide to On-Lot System Operation and Maintenance
- A Guide for Preparing Act 537 Update Revisions
- Guidelines for Design, Installation, and Operation for Small Flow Sewage Treatment Facilities
- List of Alternate Systems
- Other DEP Brochures
 - Home Buyer's Guide to the On-Lot Sewage Program
 - Homeowner's Guide to On-Lot System Operation and Maintenance
- DEP Fact Sheets

To order publications, contact the Bureau of Water Quality Protection, Division of Wastewater Management, 11th Floor, Rachel Carson State Office Building, P.O. Box 8774, Harrisburg PA 17105-8774, 717-787-8184, or contact your local DEP regional office

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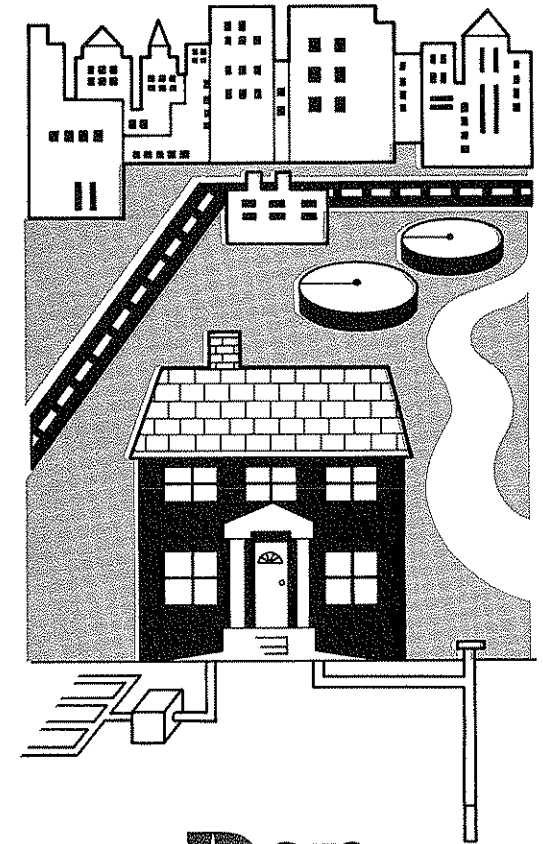
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SEWAGE FACILITIES PROGRAM



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
Tom Ridge, Governor
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
James M. Seif, Secretary

History of the Act 537 Program

Domestic sewage and wastewater are treated and disposed of by various methods, ranging from large municipally-owned sewage treatment plants to community or individual on-lot systems, also known as septic systems. Malfunctioning sewage disposal systems, regardless of type, pose a serious threat to public health and the environment. They can pollute public and private drinking water sources, often by discharging directly to the groundwater, and they can expose humans and animals to various bacteria, viruses and parasites. Repairs to these systems often can lead to financial hardships for affected municipalities or homeowners.

On January 24, 1966, the Pennsylvania Sewage Facilities Act (Act 537, as amended) was enacted to correct existing sewage disposal problems and prevent future problems. To meet this objective, the law requires proper planning of all types of sewage systems, permitting of individual and community on-lot systems and uniform standards for on-lot systems.

The sewage facilities program, commonly referred to as the Act 537 program, is largely administered by municipalities and local agencies that receive technical and financial assistance and oversight from the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

The Major Provisions of Act 537

- All municipalities must develop and implement an official sewage plan that accounts for their present and future sewage disposal needs. DEP reviews and approves the official plans and any subsequent revisions.

- Local agencies, through their local Sewage Enforcement Officers (SEOs), must approve or deny permits for on-lot systems prior to their installation. An SEO works for a local agency and is responsible for handling the agency's on-lot permitting program. SEOs are not DEP employees.
- DEP provides grants and reimbursements (through annual legislative appropriations) to municipalities and local agencies for costs associated with the planning and permitting programs.
- The Environmental Quality Board must adopt regulations establishing standards for sewage disposal facilities.
- The creation of the Sewage Advisory Committee to review existing and proposed DEP rules, regulations, standards and procedures. This advisory committee is comprised of members representing many sectors of the regulated community.

The Planning Process

Municipalities are required to develop and implement comprehensive official sewage plans that: address existing sewage disposal needs or problems; account for future land development; and provide for future sewage disposal needs of the entire municipality. This official plan is called the "base" plan.

The base plan must contain comprehensive information, including:

- Population, waterways, type of soils and geologic features, drinking water supplies.

- Location and types of existing sewage facilities.
- Local zoning and land use provisions.
- Alternatives for providing sewage facilities to areas with inadequate facilities.

Municipalities are required to revise (unless they are exempt from revising) the official plan if a new land development is proposed or unanticipated conditions or circumstances arise making the base plan inadequate. It is during this revision process that municipalities should give serious consideration to developing a sewage management program (if one is not already in the official plan) to ensure proper operation and maintenance of existing and new systems.

The Permitting Program

Act 537 requires local agencies through their Sewage Enforcement Officers (SEOs) to handle the permitting program for individual on-lot systems and community on-lot systems with a flow of 10,000 gallons-per-day or less. An individual on-lot system serves a single lot, while a community on-lot system serves two or more lots.

SEOs are trained by DEP and certified by the State Board for Certification of Sewage Enforcement Officers. SEOs are, however, employees of local agencies.

The SEO is responsible for conducting soil profiles and percolation tests and approving or denying permit applications. The SEO, and anyone installing an on-lot system, must follow the standards established by the Environmental Quality Board in Chapter 73 of the regulations.

DEP's primary role in the on-lot permit program is to provide oversight to local agencies and SEOs and assist local agencies in carrying out their permitting responsibilities. DEP does not get involved in on-lot system permitting disputes between local agencies and homeowners, other than to provide technical information.

Financial Assistance Programs

There are three financial assistance programs administered by DEP to assist municipalities and local agencies to carry out their responsibilities. DEP provides grants and reimbursements for costs associated with developing or revising official plans, administering the permit program and enforcing the Act 537 program.

Regulations On Planning, Permitting and Standards

The regulations covering the administration of the planning process, on-lot system permitting program and standards for sewage disposal facilities are Chapters 71, 72, and 73, respectively.

Planning For Long-Term Use of On-Lot Systems

Proper operation and maintenance of on-lot systems is essential for long-term use of the systems and for the protection of public health and the environment. The regulations, adopted under Act 537, require municipalities to include a "sewage management program" when they develop or revise an official plan.