Team Septic

An informal coalition of septic (Onsite Wastewater Systems) professionals and environmental organizations

HB 318 Environment – Onsite Wastewater Service – Regulations

Septic systems are vital home and commercial appliances that play a crucial role in the health and wellbeing of not only our waterways, but also people. They are easily the most expensive appliance in a home.

Maryland continues to grow, and this mean more septic systems. At the same time older systems are reaching the end of their lifespan. EPA estimate at least 10% are failing.

We also better understand how a wide number of factors impact the effectiveness of these systems and demand different designs. The increase in serious rain events, flooding and sea level rise are all having significant impact on these systems. Therefore, it is important to have a septic industry that has the oversight and capacity to adapt to our changing landscape.

Septic systems are essentially a decentralized wastewater treatment plant and need to be designed, installed, and serviced properly for its specific conditions and flows. This requires specialized knowledge and regular continuing education.

Why is a professional board needed?

Other industries have similar boards to ensure the best training and accountability, these include professional boards for electricians, plumbers, home inspectors, interior designers, well drillers and home improvement contractors. The septic industry urgently needs the same.

These important appliances require a unique set knowledge to install a system that meets the individual challenges of each home including the soil type at the site, nearby streams or water ways, the percolation of soil, the slope of the land, the size of home and many other factors.

Inconsistent local licensing

Five counties have no licensing of installers: Howard, Montgomery, Cecil, Somerset, and Baltimore City. Licensing for other parts of industry varies wildly from county to county. Some may require a one-day class and a small fee. Others just require a fee. This scattershot approach to regulating this industry does not provide the training or accountability that is urgently needed.

This bill does not prevent a local jurisdiction from implementing additional requirements. Septic professionals frequently work in several counties. A statewide professional board will afford a consistent level of oversight. 26 other States have a similar professional board. This includes all the States that are contiguous to Maryland.

Role of Environmental Health Officers

County Environmental Health Officers are tasked with a long list of responsibilities to protect Marylanders. This includes the approval of the design of new septic systems and to inspect them when installed. This is important work. Their jobs will be made easier if those doing the designing and installation have better training and accountability. HB 302 supports the work of the Environmental Health Officers.

It is important to note that Environmental Health Officers are not aware of many problems you heard about at the hearing. They are not the people called when the septic backups into the basement or up in the yard or when alarms go off. The professionals you heard from at the hearing are working longer and longer hours addressing these calls and seeing the bad designs, improper installations, and bad repairs.

Conclusion

HB 318 sets up the missing professional board and safeguards against faulty designs and faulty installations that pollute our waterways and groundwater and pose a public health risk and will protect the investment in a home. When there are problems this bill provides missing accountability. At its heart this is a consumer-friendly effort.

HB 318 establishes a board made up of the profession from across the state as well as consumers to recommend to Maryland Department of the Environment actions and regulations to strengthen the industry and sets up an enforcement mechanism for bad actors. This protects the homeowner and the industry. Most serious professional septic service providers support this bill. Every Maryland septic system owner will benefit from its protections.

Examples of Septic System Design, Installation and Maintenance Issues

1. A licensed plumber illegally installed a septic system in Taneytown that failed. This cost the homeowner was $10,000 for the illegal system and $20,000for the installation of a permitted system. Nothing was done to this plumber and he is still permitted to do work in Carroll Co.

2. “I got a Norweco (advanced treatment device) alarm call. I found the pump chamber was flooded and the system was about one flush away from going into the house. They had to have the pump chamber pumped out to give them enough storage until the pump chamber could be repaired on Monday. This system failed because of the way it was wired. Most electrical work outside the house for a septic system does not get inspected by the electrical department. They just assume the health department is looking at it. This is true for all counties.

3. A new homeowner discovered that their septic system was badly designed and installed only after their dog got seriously sick. The property transfer inspection when they bought their home did not identify any issues.

   The errors include a drip dispersal system was installed with the incorrect control panel, resulting in the incorrect amount of water being dispersed in the drain field. This also messed up the routine system flushing and backflow. Additionally, the K rain valve was broken. Neither the inspector not the installer could be held responsible.

4. Homeowner buys a house after the septic property transfer inspector says everything is in good shape. Three years later they put their house on the market and a different inspector

finds a straight pipe to a stream. To sell they must make a $40,000 septic repair.

5. Installer goes to a small lot on an older property to make a quick and easy repair. Sometimes they get a permit and sometimes not. They do not always protect the site from damage from their equipment. Often, the quick fix that does not solve the problem as the owner discovers when they still cannot flush their toilet. This kind of work can damage the property to the point that even a new innovative system will not work, and they must now use a holding tanks severely decreasing the value of the property.

6. Designer submits a poor design to the county. After three submittals the county gets frustrated and writes down exactly what needs to be corrected on the submittal. After five more submittals the county just accepts what they have submitted, even though there are still mistakes.

7. “I go to a big job that I supplied materials for to see how the installer is doing. The installer has the wrong pump in one of the chambers. When questioned, they do not even have the design drawings on site. After they review the drawings, they agree with me. But they say the engineer just left the site and said everything was great despite the wrong pump in the wrong place.”

8. “I go to a job to certify a new BAT installation. I discovered the pump chamber equipment was installed incorrectly. I did not supply this equipment nor was I supposed to inspect it but did because a bad installation will affect how my BAT preforms. This pump chamber passed three county inspections. The homeowner ended up paying $5,000.00 to correct the problem. The installer paid nothing and would not return the homeowner calls.”

9. Installer puts in a septic tank backwards. This error results in a backup or at best, a terribly slow draining system. Depending on the grade of the site this could go undetected for years, but it will eventually have to get fixed.

10. With the more frequent and heavy rains systems are not being designed to meet these conditions. County approves a septic design; installer goes to install the system and the trenches fill up with water while the installer is digging them even on a sunny day. System has failed before it was completed. Usually when this happens the property owner is looking at a $50,000.00 system and a delay on their project of 6 - 12 months.