

Fixing septics, protecting groundwater



Craig



Flood



Hackbarth

Cedar Beach resident Lois Hackbarth captured a sunset over Lake Zumbro. Hers is one of 23 Cedar Beach homes now connected to a shared sewage treatment system. The Southeast Minnesota Wastewater Initiative helped residents choose a system and secure grants to help pay for it. **Contributed Photo**

In communities such as Cedar Beach near Rochester, Sheila Craig of the Southeast Minnesota Wastewater Initiative helps residents choose a solution, and then finds grants to help cover the cost. Her specialty: hard-to-solve and out-of-compliance.



ORONOCO — Cedar Beach once was a collection of small cabins built in the '30s and '40s as weekend getaways for Rochester city dwellers. Gradually, permanent residents moved in, transforming cabins into family homes.

As long as the toilets worked, the sinks drained and the basements stayed dry, no one thought about the septic systems.

“When I first moved out here, that wasn’t even a thought of mine,” said Alice Flood, 69. Attracted to the lakeshore property and small-town atmosphere, she and her young family moved into a converted cabin in 1976.

Then one February in the early 1990s, her drainfield froze. For nearly two months until it could be fixed, her three elementary school-age children showered at friends’ houses or at school. She did laundry at the laundromat. A neighbor periodically flushed out the septic system.

“What happens the next time? How long is this going to last?” Flood said.

Her system was still working 10 years ago when a septic inventory of Olmsted and Wabasha counties determined Cedar Beach and its under-sized lots were out of compliance. Some needed upgrading. Some had straight-pipe

systems that fed directly into ditches or the Zumbro River. Like her neighbors, Flood had never considered a community system until she met Sheila Craig.

Craig is the southern region community sewage treatment facilitator for the Southeast Minnesota Wastewater Initiative (SMWI). The 14-county SMWI seeks remedies for small communities with failing septic systems. Introducing potential solutions is part of Craig's job.

"If they were easily fixed, we wouldn't get them," Craig said.

In one case, the solution was a 6-mile-long pipe from West Jefferson to Cleveland in Le Sueur County. In another, residents have spent decades squabbling over the issue.

Flood served as the community liaison for Cedar Beach, fielding complaints and relaying them to Craig, the township and the company that ultimately installed the 23-home shared cluster treatment system.

Cedar Beach is among 31 small communities the SMWI has helped bring into compliance, starting with Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) funding in 2002. Four of those are on Lake Zumbro.

"A lot of these have what I call the first system after the outhouse with a cesspool or a drywell," Craig said. "Back in the day, that was an OK way to treat your sewage. They've since learned that's not really treating it properly. It can still get into the groundwater."

Since 2012, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) has awarded three Clean Water Fund grants totaling \$771,700



Lake views and proximity to Rochester are what drew some residents to Cedar Beach. Resident Lois Hackbarth sees this view from her deck.

Contributed Photo

to support the SMWI. Part of the BWSR grants have paid Craig's part-time salary. The last one expires Dec. 31.

Craig's first task is to help communities understand the problem. She then works with residents to choose a solution, applies for grant funding and serves as a liaison to local governments.

"The whole premise of our project is it's grassroots-based," Craig said.

The process typically takes four to seven years.

It's extraordinarily difficult for individual property owners to organize, reach consensus and navigate government deadlines and grant applications alone. Project partners have included township and county governments, the MPCA and the Public Facilities Authority.

"We weren't aware what could be done and needed to be done," said Lois Hackbarth, 76, who moved to Cedar Beach from Rochester nearly 10 years ago. "She applied for grants. She went to the right government agencies. She just knew what to do."

When the problem isn't

obvious — Craig has amassed a collection of raw-sewage photos since she started the job in 2003 — it's harder to convince property owners that something needs to be done.

My toilet flushes.

It's a refrain Flood heard from Cedar Beach residents who didn't see the need for a community system.

"Why do we have to? My toilet flushes just fine today," Flood heard.

Cost was the No. 1 concern, especially among recent retirees and seasonal residents. The community septic cost each Cedar Beach property owner about \$13,300 (assessed over 20 years) for a low-interest Small Communities Wastewater Construction loan, plus an annual \$475 maintenance fee.

Grants covered 72 percent of the cluster mound, grinder pumps and collection system costs. They included a \$749,700 Point Source Implementation Grant and a \$245,800 Small Communities Wastewater Construction Grant.

"Start with yourself and what would it cost you if your

Counties Included

Dakota, Dodge, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, Le Sueur, Mower, Olmsted, Rice, Steele, Wabasha, Waseca and Winona.

septic blew up or it just didn't function," Flood advised.

"Everybody believes in the clean water. Nobody was (disputing) that. It was, 'Are you kidding me? For a single person, I don't flush my toilet that many times a day. I don't shower every day. I don't wash my clothes as much as if I have four children.'"

Flood advises other communities considering similar projects to make sure everyone — especially those who oppose the project — attends informational meetings so they know the facts.

Since the system went online in late 2016, the company has resolved initial odor and sound issues. It's working to restore landscaping damaged during installation. That's been the biggest continuing issue among residents, many of them with considerable time and work invested in their yards.

For Hackbarth, the community system solved another problem. With a septic in her yard, there wasn't enough room to build a garage. Since the community system went in, she had her septic system removed and a 30-by-28-foot detached garage built.

Craig, meanwhile, is on to the next projects.

Twelve more are in the works throughout the region.