

Otsego Lake Association Informational Meeting Concerning the
Otsego Lake Septic System Inspection Program

August 20, 2005

The meeting was called to order by President David Sanford in the Graduate Program Conference Room beginning at 8:35. David introduced OLA board member Wayne Bunn, P.E. who moderated the program. Wayne introduced the agenda and the panel (Win McIntyre, Ed Olsen, Sue Silvernail, Jon McManus, and Hans de Waal).

Working with the NYS Dept. of Health, the Village of Cooperstown enacted the original Otsego Lake Watershed Rules and Regulations in 1977 under Section 1100 of the NYS Public Health Law to protect the Village's sole source of water supply, then amended them in 1985; also in 1985, the Village created the Otsego Lake Watershed Supervisory Committee (WSC) to administer the watershed rules and regulations. However, due to a lack of funding, the actual inspections of septic systems around Otsego Lake were not started as planned. The situation changed in 2004 when funding for the septic system inspection program was provided by the Otsego County Conservation Association and the Clark Foundation. The WSC then prepared management regulations for all septic systems within 500 feet of Otsego Lake and 100 feet of major tributary streams. The management regulations called for all such septic systems to be inspected every five years or when the property transferred from one owner to another. All septic systems were inventoried in 2004 with the actual on-site inspections started in 2005. At this point, the NYS Dept. of Health acts in an advisory role to the WSC when requested plus it oversees their so-called "permitted systems" such as the motels, restaurants, and children's camps. Members of the WSC are appointed by the Village of Cooperstown and consist of two representatives from the Village and one each from the Towns of Otsego, Springfield, and Middlefield.

Wayne then turned the program over to Win McIntyre, Watershed Coordinator, and Ed Olsen, Inspector, who discussed what constitutes a failed system, the status of inspections to date, and what to expect. Win reported that inspections had begun in early June and that at this point 59 inspections had been completed. (He expects that 80 should be completed by the end of the year.) Out of those 59, 29 failed and 30 passed (a 49% failure rate). Win reported that 2/3 of the failures were due to leaky tanks, most of which were the old metal variety. The other 1/3 failed because the drain water lines were not properly hooked up to the septic*. Septic systems that pass will receive a Certificate of Compliance which is valid for five years. Systems that fail will receive a Notice of Violation which will specify the nature of the violation, the corrective action required, and the date by which the corrective action must be completed. Property owners will have up to one year to correct the violations. Win also is available to meet with the owners. He reminded the group that systems that may be working hydraulically may not be working biologically. He also added that new systems must be designed by N.Y. State licensed engineers.

Ed Olsen then took the floor to report that it is important for homeowners to know where their septic tanks and leach fields are located. He explained that the biggest problems causing failure were seepage pits and old metal tanks. Ed discussed how he and Win are

in the process of recording their inspections for the Watershed Supervisory Committee so that there will be a permanent record of where all systems are located.

Wayne next introduced lake property owner, Sue Silvernail who detailed her experiences discovering the location of her system, the inspection process, and dealing with the failure of the system. Sue then related what she has learned in the process and her dilemma about how to resolve the problem. Sue shared some of the financial ramifications of the decision and the pros and cons of various options, including sharing a system with neighbors.

Jon McManus assisted by Doug VanDusen (both from Lamont Engineers in Cobleskill) was next to speak (excellent presentation). He discussed the engineering of systems. He stressed that the engineer has to sign off on the final inspection of a new system. He feels this is a safeguard that offsets future maintenance costs. Jon presented diagrams of how various systems work and discussed the demands of different topographies. Included were absorption beds, shallow absorption trenches, cut and fill systems, and raised systems. He also discussed methods to reduce the size of the leach field such as intermittent media filters. Tertiary treatment systems for phosphorus removal were also briefly discussed. These systems are not currently required, but may be in the future. Lamont Engineers also spoke about alternatives such as shared systems with separate tanks and secondary filters but shared leach fields and terracing. Secondary filters would prevent contamination from a tank that needed pumping.

Hans DeWaal, P.E. of DeWaal Engineering (Richfield Springs) was next on the agenda. Hans focused on problems with the leach area. He discussed and showed an example of the Eljen -In – Drain system where one square foot of material provides 10 cubic feet of absorption. This system has a 30 year history and significantly reduces the area necessary for a leach field. Hans also discussed the Multi-Flo-Aeration system. Hans reminded property owners that it was important to utilize systems properly by spreading out water usage over the course of a day.

The final portion of the meeting was dedicated to a lively question and answer. Topics discussed included the following: Lakeside property owners questioned the cost of expensive replacement systems. The concept of a Town Sewer District with treatment at the Village of Cooperstown wastewater treatment plant was discussed. The one year corrective period may be a problem considering the availability of qualified engineers and contractors plus difficult site conditions and access. The WSC will work with property owners who have unique situations or need additional time to comply with a failure.

This just in from Win: Through September, we inspected 90 systems. Of these, 45 passed and 45 failed (pretty close to 50/50). Of the 45 failures, 29 will require complete system replacement, 5 only a tank replacement, and 11 require redirecting grey water to the septic tank. Almost all of the failures are due to corroded metal tanks that, for the most part, overflow to seepage pits. Metal tanks and seepage pits have not been allowed for the past 15 years.