

Septic System Permits Application Process

February, 2014

A permit is required before installation or major repair of an on-site sewage treatment system in Guthrie County. Prior to the installation of a new septic system or the replacement of a tank or lateral field, this Dept. must be contacted. The installer or property owner must have this permit so that the County can verify that the proper system will be installed.

A permit is needed for the installation of a new septic system on any new home, business, shop, etc. Also, a permit is needed to replace a failing system on such existing sites. Further, a permit is needed if the tank or the lateral field is to be replaced or added onto. These major repairs mean that the whole system must be evaluated to determine what is needed to have a system that will meet the current rules in place.

Another place where a permit and new system is needed is on a vacant house or building that is being put back into use. If the structure has not been occupied or used for the previous two years, the Board of Health does not recognize the existing system (unless there is a permit already on file for a previously installed system). The existing system or parts of the system may only be used if it is inspected and determined to be in substantial compliance with the rules. Sometimes a tank will pass but must have a lateral field added, for example.

A common misconception is that existing systems are “grandfathered in”. Just because a system is present and has been used for the past 40 years or longer does not mean it is okay. The Iowa Supreme Court has ruled that due to their importance such health regulations as those regulating septic system take precedence over any “grandfathering”. So any existing system that does not meet the current rules can be forced to be repaired or replaced for any valid reason.

Obviously, property owners and contractors bring most permit requests to the Dept. When remodeling, constructing a new home or business or when a system obviously fails, this Dept. would be contacted to issue a permit for the new or repaired system. Sometimes the Dept. of Natural Resources will refer systems to this office if they are discovered during investigations of stream pollution, etc. Also, the Board of Health will respond to valid complaints from citizens.

Frequently, tenants, customers, or neighbors will contact this office concerning septic systems that back up, that are ponding, that are flowing sewage into the yard, or that are discharging onto a neighboring property. These complaints are investigated and, if found to be valid, are referred to the Board of Health. If the Board views the complaint as valid, then the property owner will be required to upgrade or replace the system.

Permits are not issued until a percolation test has been conducted. This is a soil testing procedure to see how permeable the soil is for accepting the sewage effluent. In most systems, the soil is relied upon to treat the sewage and return it to its natural components of water and carbon compounds with the natural destruction of dangerous microorganisms. This percolation test has a lot to do with the size and type of system that is installed.

The County currently has two different charges for the Septic Permit. Out in the general County areas, the time involved to issue a permit usually only involves one trip to the site at the time of installation to verify that the system is installed properly. This permit fee is currently \$125.00. Within the Lake Panorama On-Site Wastewater Management District the permit fee is currently \$225.00. In Lake Panorama, the lots are quite small and the terrain often difficult. The normal number of visits to a lot is usually 3-5 with 6-10 visits not uncommon. Because of this a higher fee is established. If only major repairs are required (such as replacing a tank on an existing, approved system), a Major Repair Permit for a fee of \$110.00 is required and in the rural areas the fee is \$80.00.

To simplify the whole procedure the permit is not actually provided to the property owner until the system is completely finished. Then the owner receives one set of papers that includes the percolation test information, the actual permit information, and the completed installation drawing. This makes the process simpler and saves on time, postage, etc.

There is another type of on-site permit that is called an Operating Permit for On-Site Systems. They fall into two categories: those for individual homes and those for "cluster" systems such as at Lake Panorama at facilities like Boulder Cove Condominiums, Lake Panorama National Resort, St. Thomas More Center, etc.

These are more complex systems, not the typical septic tank/lateral field system. Most of these involve numerous moving parts, blowers, special media filters, valves, etc. that need maintenance. To assure that this maintenance is done the Board of Health charges an annual fee and then runs a monitoring program to assure the required contracts for service are kept in force and the company actually does the maintenance.

Individual homes have a \$40.00 annual Permit fee. Then this Dept. tracks the contract and receives copies of the maintenance inspection reports. Some systems require one inspection per year but others require up to four per year. Whenever a contract is not renewed by the homeowner or the company does not supply a particular inspection report, this department makes inquiries, sends notices, or sends official orders to get the system back into compliance. The \$40.00 partially covers this office work.

Large "cluster" systems are for systems utilizing thousands of gallons of water per day. These all have State installation permits through the Dept. of Natural Resources but the on-going maintenance requirements fall to the County. There is a \$100.00 annual Permit fee for these facilities. We currently have six in the County. Annually, the facility fills out contact information on the facility, who is the on-call plumber, etc. Then semi-annually the plumber is sent an inspection form that must be completed and returned to this Dept. to assure that maintenance is completed.

In this way, these more complex systems are monitored. This obviously helps keep the environment cleaner. But it also assures the system will last longer and have fewer problems. As with any other equipment, maintenance prolongs the useful life of a system.