



Developing Effective Wastewater Management in Rural, Low Income West Virginia Communities

Funded by a West Virginia Development Office Flex-E grant, the Lincoln County Commission and WVU Extension brought together a group of people currently wrestling with the dilemma of wastewater management. The Conference was held at Chief Logan Hotel and Conference Center on February 26, 2008. Sixty-six people attended, including representatives from many state agencies, public service districts, private businesses, nonprofit organizations, and local citizens.

The recommendations in this report are not endorsed by the agencies whose staff attended the Conference, or by the conference funders.

Thanks to the Lincoln County Commission and WVU Extension for their leadership in the development of the conference, and to Canaan Valley Institute for the design and development of this report.

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For a full copy of the Conference Report, go to www.canaanvi.org, or contact Ric MacDowell, Conference Coordinator, at ric.macdowell@mail.wvu.edu.

Recommendations from a Conference Organized by the Lincoln County Commission

Studies done in some regions of West Virginia show that 67% of households have inadequate wastewater treatment, with most homes discharging raw sewage into rivers and streams. The vast majority of streams are severely impaired by fecal coliform and related contaminants. Raw waste is visible along stream banks. Economic development opportunities are hampered, housing continues to deteriorate, and collective resignation and pessimism become further ingrained.

Many of the unserved communities are often the region's most rural. While resources available for infrastructure funding and installation are extremely limited across the entire state, some assistance is available to publicly owned sewer providers for larger

projects. There are, however, few resources available to small, rural communities striving to address wastewater needs. These same communities are also some of the state's poorest. These communities have very little capacity to assume any debt for infrastructure installation. Alternative approaches to funding, installation, and management of small community infrastructure projects are critically needed. So, too, are new models and support for local decision making.

February's Flex-E Conference demonstrated the high level of interest and growing expertise that exists within our state to address the challenges of rural wastewater management. Conference participants felt strongly that it is important to create opportunities for future collaboration as well as work to gain support and commitments from state and local leaders and funding agencies. Conference attendees generated a list of recommendations. These recommendations have been prioritized by the conference team.



PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

CONDUCT ONGOING PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS

Key issues include the relationship between human health and wastewater management, how septic systems work and fail, what new technologies offer, management ideas for individuals and communities, how communities and individuals can access wastewater treatment services, the relationship between costs of systems and benefits, how improved systems effect quality of life and property values.

INSURE ONGOING WASTEWATER PLANNING AND LEADERSHIP

Create a formal group of people from agencies and organizations who continue to develop wastewater management ideas, programs, and champion improving wastewater management for the state.

ESTABLISH SPECIALIZED WORKSHOPS, TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES, AND CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

County sanitarians, system installers, water and wastewater managers and board members, and system maintainers all need specialized training. Generally a more competent, highly trained workforce is needed to manage wastewater systems in the state.

- Work with colleges and universities to create programs which would lead to degrees with certification as water and wastewater facility managers.
- Establish certification programs, continuing training requirements, and upgraded salary schedules to encourage career development in water or wastewater work.
- Re-write state codes to require continuing education credits for installers, water and wastewater members, systems maintenance operators so all have consistent, uniform, on-going training to keep up with evolving technology.

PROMOTE POLICY CHANGES BY INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDERS

Encourage all infrastructure funders including the Infrastructure Council to require sewage plans when water goes into an area. Installing wastewater collection after water systems are already in place is much more complex and costly than planning as water goes in.

ENCOURAGE CHANGES AND INCREASE COLLABORATION AT THE COUNTY LEVEL

- Encourage the possibility of moving toward single, county-wide PSDs responsible for both water and sewer. Single countywide PSDs could include municipal systems where appropriate.
- Where PSDs do not have both water and wastewater responsibility, insure that consideration for developing sewage capacity proceed in tandem with expansion of water.
- Encourage County Commissions and PSDs to work with county health departments to develop programs to manage conventional / traditional home septic systems.

CREATE NEW FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

- Investigate the creation of special state and/or county tax credits for low income homeowners who repair or replace failing onsite wastewater systems.
- Investigate developing a state funded unsewered communities fund to help install new systems in remote, un and/or under served areas. Maryland has adopted such an approach with its Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund.
- Create planning grants for low income, unsewered communities to determine what types of wastewater systems make best sense for them.
- Provide resources for additional staff and/or volunteers to assist small rural communities and PSDs with project planning, design, and construction through state agencies, Regional Planning and Development Councils, the VISTA program, and/or non-profit partners.
- Investigate ways to reduce costs for design and constructing wastewater systems in low income, unsewered communities such as: exempting construction from prevailing wage laws, self-help options, increasing staff and resources for PSDs, design-build options, developing new, affordable technologies.

