



Olympia's Proposed Septic to Sewer Conversion Program

Frequently Asked Questions

AUGUST 2009

Septic to Sewer Conversion Program

The purpose of Olympia's Wastewater Utility is to protect public and environmental health by ensuring that wastewater is collected and conveyed to treatment and disposal facilities with minimal risk. With the exception of properties served by septic systems, also known as onsite sewage systems (OSS), the Utility performs the collection of all wastewater within the Olympia urban growth area.

For the sake of water quality, the Olympia City Council has made the conversion of septic systems to the public sewer a priority wastewater utility policy. The City of Olympia is considering modest incentives to assist property owners who choose to or need to convert from a septic system to public sewer service. The following provides background information, frequently asked questions, and details about proposed incentives to convert to the public sewer.

Background

There are more than 2,000 septic systems within the Olympia city limits and an additional 2,200 septic systems are located within the City's urban growth area. Even at low to moderate housing densities unfavorable soil conditions, combined with shallow groundwater levels, challenge development served by septic systems.

Water quality problems associated with septic systems in our region are well documented. Even properly functioning septic systems still discharge only partially treated wastewater to the environment. Under the authority of the Clean Water Act, the State of Washington has listed several Olympia streams as impaired by bacteria and the State is developing recovery plans. Failing septic systems are also a principal cause of shellfish harvesting restrictions in Henderson Inlet.

Frequently Asked Questions

The City routinely receives the following questions regarding septic systems.

- ▶ Who permits septic systems in the City of Olympia?
- ▶ Why convert from a septic system to public sewer service?
- ▶ What incentives does the City have for converting septic systems to the public sewer?
- ▶ Is there a sewer available so I can connect my property to the public sewer?
- ▶ What is a STEP system?
- ▶ Will I be required to connect to the public sewer system?
- ▶ How can I prevent a septic failure?
- ▶ What are the costs involved in converting from a septic systems to public sewer service?
- ▶ Will sewer utilities be extended to my property?
- ▶ How can a new public sewer main extension project be financed?
- ▶ How long does it take to design and construct a public sewer extension?
- ▶ Can I access the public sewer main through my neighbor's property?
- ▶ How much are monthly sewer rates?
- ▶ Who can I contact with questions?

► **Who permits septic systems in the City of Olympia?**

The Thurston County Environmental Health Program (TCEH), not the City of Olympia, is the public agency responsible for permitting septic systems throughout Thurston County. Information about Thurston County's requirements regarding maintenance, expansion, enhancement, replacement or abandonment of septic systems is available at <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehoss/> or by calling (360) 754-3355, Ext. 6518.

► **Why convert from a septic system to public sewer service?**

The City considers use of septic systems in an urban or suburban setting to be only a temporary means of wastewater treatment and disposal. Septic systems have limited life spans. When an existing system fails, some property owners may not have sufficient land with an adequate percolation rate for a replacement or reserve drain field area. In such cases, the only alternatives available may be an expensive, engineered system or abandonment of the septic system and connection to the public sewer system. If your property is within 300 feet of an existing public sewer, the City may require you to connect to the sewer when your existing system fails or if you need to expand your septic system to make substantial improvements to your home.

Converting from an individual private septic system to public sewer may increase the market value of your property. Additionally, if your existing septic system is failing, the market value of your property can decrease until you fix the situation by repairing or replacing your septic system or connecting to the City's sewer system. Also, since septic systems are unpopular with many homebuyers and can limit the ability to expand your house or build over portions of your property, having a septic system may result in your property being less marketable at time of sale, as compared to similar sewered properties.

► **What incentives does the City have for converting a septic system to the public sewer?**

The City currently recently adopted the following incentives to encourage property owners to convert from septic systems to the public sewer system. The City is taking the perspective that the cost of making sewer service available for septic system conversions can be classified as costs of the system and funded partially by general utility revenue resource.

- **Waiver and Deferral of the City Collection System's General Facilities Charge (GFC):** This incentive is intended to motivate the owners of properties where the sewer is currently available as well as properties benefiting from sewer extension projects to connect to the public sewer. The City's GFC (\$2,346) will be waived for properties that convert a septic system within a 2-year time period following formal notification of sewer availability. There is no need to wait for notice from the City to benefit from the GFC waiver. Properties converting from a septic system that do not connect to the public sewer within 2 years of notification of eligibility will have to pay the GFC, but will have the option to defer payment over a 3-year period.
- **Special Sewer Connection Charge:** Properties converting from a septic system are eligible to pay the apportioned infrastructure costs through a "special sewer connection charge" to be billed by the City. The hope is that customers will find that a payment plan that allows paying back the cost of the infrastructure over time will be more manageable and encourage connection to the public sewer. The charge will only be applicable to the payment of public infrastructure costs. The charge is a flat monthly sum of \$200 collected over a period of time the length of which would vary based upon the amount due (including interest). The charge will include interest based upon the bonded rate or the Consumer Price Index.

Property owners will enter an agreement with the City placing a lien against the property for the apportioned cost and agreeing to pay the special charge in the interim. Payment in full at the time of a property sale would be required to expedite cost recovery and prevent improving a property's value and then passing the payment of the conversion costs on to the new owner. Use of this payment plan is optional.

- **Discount on Public Sewer Cost:** Significant infrastructure at significant cost would be required to convert some of the highest risk septic systems. The public infrastructure cost alone may exceed \$30,000 per residence placing the cost outside of the range a homeowner could reasonably be expected to pay. As a result, the utility will discount public infrastructure costs, over a threshold value of \$20,000, by 50%. (For example, if the infrastructure cost were \$30,000, the City would reduce the cost recovery by \$5,000 or half of the cost over \$20,000) The threshold value will be adjusted annually for inflation.

► ***Is there a sewer available so I can connect my property to the public sewer?***

More than 600 properties currently served by septic systems are adjacent to and eligible to connect to a public sewer. You can reference the sewer infrastructure map online to see if the sewer is available in your neighborhood. However, the only sure way to determine the availability, restrictions, and requirements for connection to the sewer is to contact the City's Wastewater Utility Staff at (360) 570-3741 or [email Wastewater Utility](#) staff.

► ***What is a STEP System?***

STEP means Septic Tank Effluent Pump. Most customers' wastewater goes directly into the City's sewer collection pipes. Wastewater from a customer on a STEP system is retained in a sewage holding tank. Liquid waste is then pumped from the tank through a pressure pipeline into sewer lines leading to the LOTT Alliance Wastewater Treatment Plant. The City maintains the STEP system and periodically pumps solid waste from the holding tank, similar to a septic system. Although there is a moratorium on new developments served with STEP systems, if the STEP sewer is available to the property, single family residences on existing lots may connect. Due to the additional mechanical equipment associated with a STEP system, the initial cost of installing a STEP system is greater than that for a gravity sewer service. For more information, visit the [STEP Information webpage](#).

► ***Will I be required to connect to the public sewer system?***

Currently, if your property is within 300 feet of an existing public sewer, the City may require you to connect to the sewer when your existing system fails or if you are making improvements to your home that would require an expansion of your drain field. The City does not plan to make the conversion of properly functioning septic systems to the public sewer system mandatory. That may change if recovery plans developed by the State of Washington identify the conversion of septic systems as a required action to clean up impaired water bodies within the City of Olympia.

► ***How can I prevent a septic failure?***

Maintenance is key to preventing the failure of your septic system. If your system has been properly designed, sited, and installed, the rest is up to you. Pump regularly, avoid excess water use, and watch what you put down the drain and flush down the toilet. For additional information, contact the Thurston County Environmental Health Program at (360) 754-3355, Ext. 6518 or refer to their website at www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehoss/. Signs of a failing septic system may include slow draining toilets and drains, an odor of sewage, and wet areas on or near the drain field.

► ***What are the costs involved in converting from a septic system to public sewer service?***

There can be four major costs in converting from a septic system to sewer service: the public sewer infrastructure, side sewer construction, septic system abandonment and connection fees.

1. **Public Sewer Infrastructure:** The first cost depends on whether a public sewer is adjacent to your property and suitable for your use. A public sewer is usually eight inches in diameter and may be located in a street or a sewer easement through private property.

If no public sewer is available, you would be responsible for extending the public sewer from the end of the City's existing system to and along the frontage of your property prior to making a connection. The cost to extend a sewer main to your property varies, depending on the length of the project, difficulty of the terrain, soil type, need to acquire easements, the amount of engineering work required, pipe and backfill materials specified, methods of construction employed, and surface restoration requirements. In rare cases, you may also owe a reimbursement to the installer of public sewer facilities such as pump stations constructed downstream of the sewer you install. Construction of a public sewer requires permitting and inspection by the City's Community Planning and Development Department at (360) 753-8314. To receive a permit, you would be required to submit design plans, conforming with the City's Engineering Design and Development Standards, for review and approval.

The cost of a sewer extension project can sometimes be shared with your neighbors who also would benefit from the availability of a sewer adjacent to their properties. Longer, shared sewer projects allow for an economy of scale in design and construction that reduces the cost per property, as compared to each property owner sequentially installing a separate, smaller sewer extension project. Starting in 2009, the City will be constructing a limited number of

neighborhood sewers in priority areas. Properties that happen to front on the alignment of the neighborhood sewers would be able to connect directly to it, at which time they would enter an agreement to reimburse the City for a share of the cost of construction. Typical infrastructure reimbursement costs per property along the sewer alignments are preliminarily estimated to be \$15,000-\$22,000. However, because of the cost of removing and replacing pavement and working around existing utilities, the cost for installing sewer utilities in existing neighborhoods is expensive and at times can even exceed \$30,000 per property.

2. *Side Sewer Construction:* A side sewer is generally a four- or six-inch diameter pipeline that runs from your house to the public sewer. The property owner is responsible for constructing and maintaining the side sewer. A design that allows wastewater to flow via gravity from your house to the sewer is preferred. The City may allow the installation of an individual privately owned residential pump if elevations don't permit a gravity flow system. A portion of this sewer (known as a sewer lateral) may have been stubbed out from the public sewer to your property when the sewer main was constructed. Property owners may do work on their own property, but construction within the public right-of-way or City easements requires hiring a licensed contractor registered with the City.

The existing pipeline from the house to the septic tank may be used as part of the new side sewer only if it is a minimum of four inches in diameter. A side sewer is then constructed the rest of the way (sometimes wrapping around the house) to the public sewer. Alternatively, plumbing beneath the house sometimes can be redirected toward the public sewer so as to avoid having to construct a pipeline around the house. The City typically uses an estimate of \$2,500-\$3,500 per average side sewer. The cost is highly variable depending on the side sewer length, terrain and surface conditions. If a pump is necessary, this cost would also increase. These costs are paid directly by the property owners to the contractor they hire at the time the work is done.

3. *Septic System Abandonment:* The Thurston County Environmental Health Program (TCEH) requires that septic tanks be properly abandoned when no longer needed. The existing side sewer as well as the installation of the new side sewer must be completed, inspected and accepted before the existing septic tank is removed from service and abandoned. The abandonment process involves obtaining a permit from TCEH; having the tank pumped out one last time; removing and disposing of the lid or crushing the lid and using it to fill the tank; and filling the empty septic tank with compacted earth, gravel or sand. Specific requirements for septic tank abandonment can be obtained from TCEH. Costs for abandoning a septic system are approximately \$800 to \$1,200.

4. *Connection Fees:* In addition to paying a property's proportional share of the cost of constructing the new sewer, the City collects a number of fees for permits, inspections and providing collection system and treatment plant capacity. Total fees to connect a property to the public sewer (excluding reimbursement charges for sewer construction) would currently be about \$7,000 per residential unit. These fees are due prior to connection to a public sewer.

Summary of Costs: The following table presents some very preliminary estimates of the cost of obtaining sewer service. More accurate cost estimates can be made based on the details of specific sewer projects when they are developed.

PURPOSE	COST ESTIMATE*
1. <i>Public Sewer Infrastructure</i> (if not existing)	\$15,000 - \$22,000+
2. <i>Side Sewer Construction to House</i> (double if pump is needed)	\$2,500 - \$3,500
3. <i>Septic Tank Abandonment</i>	\$800 - \$1,200
4. <i>Connection Fees</i>	
LOTT Alliance GFC (Treatment Plant)	\$3,877
City Wastewater GFC	Waived**
Permits for Sewer Connection	\$140 - \$750
Fees Subtotal	\$4,020 - \$4,630
TOTAL	\$9,500 - \$33,000+

*The above estimates were made in 2009 and should be adjusted accordingly.

**The City Wastewater GFC is waived per OMC 13.08.205(C), when a septic system is abandoned.

► ***Will sewer utilities be extended to my property?***

The City of Olympia has long had the policy that development pays for installation of its own utilities. In the past, a developer or one or more property owners working together have financed public sewer extensions in the City of Olympia. The City is proposing to start limited neighborhood sewer extensions to promote the conversion of septic systems.

Sewer extension projects would be ranked and selected based on public and environmental health concerns, development densities, known septic system failures, community interest, soil characteristics, septic system age, proximity to wellhead protection areas, and the ability to team with other Public Works projects. Community interest is important to the success of a project and would be gauged based the level of interest expressed by the neighborhood. Sewer extension projects would be recommended by utility staff and approved by the Utility Advisory Committee. [Maps depicting the ranking criteria are available online.](#)

► ***How can a new public sewer main extension project be financed?***

Typically, public sewer extensions in the City of Olympia are financed by a developer or one or more property owners working together.

- *Developer:* In the case of an established neighborhood with septic systems, the original developer may be long gone, but sometimes a new developer needs to build a sewer through the neighborhood to get to an undeveloped site. If it is affordable, the developer may use private funding to build the new public sewer extension and potentially have the City collect a reimbursement from property owners of existing homes when they connect to the new sewer main. The reimbursement amount would be a proportional share of the cost of constructing the new sewer main.
- *Other Private Installers:* Much like a developer, one or more neighbors can pool their private funds to construct a new sewer main to serve their properties. Again, the City may collect a reimbursement from other property owners when they connect their homes to that new sewer main and disburse the funds to the original installer(s).
- *City:* The City is proposing to start installing a limited number of neighborhood sewer mains to promote the conversion of septic systems to the public sewer. Sewer mains would be installed in locations identified as being high priority environmental or public health risks and having a high level of community interest. City Council has approved \$300,000 per year for 5 years with the goal of installing 400 to 500 linear feet of sewer main and converting 10 to 15 septic systems per year. The City's cost of constructing the sewer would be reimbursed by property owners at the time of connection to the sewer.

► ***How long does it take to design and construct a public sewer extension?***

Most public sewer mains, if built privately, could be designed and completed within a year. If significant street repaving is involved, that work may be delayed until the weather is warm enough to allow the paving materials to be installed properly.

► ***Can I access the public sewer main through my neighbor's property?***

A property's side sewer should connect to the sewer main in the street on which the property fronts. To facilitate the orderly extension of sewer mains, a side sewer may not extend across an adjacent property to connect to a sewer main. There are some extraordinary circumstances, particularly where sewer mains are located within easements and not the right-of-way, in which side sewers may be permitted to be installed within easements across adjacent properties.

► ***How much are monthly sewer rates?***

Once connected to the public sewer system, a property owner is required to pay a monthly sewer service charge. This charge covers the operation and maintenance costs for collection, treatment, and disposal of wastewater, and renovation of the sewers and wastewater treatment facilities. The 2009 sewer rate is \$44.27 per month. Sewer rates are set by City Council annually. State law requires customers to be notified in advance of future increases and allowed an opportunity to be heard and protest.

► **Who can I contact with questions?**

For additional information about the City of Olympia Wastewater Utility requirements and procedures please contact Eric Christensen, Water Resources Engineer, at (360) 570-3741 or via email at echriste@ci.olympia.wa.us. You may also contact Diane Utter at (360) 753-8562 or via email at dutter@ci.olympia.wa.us. An alternate number for both is (360) 753-8588, which is the Public Works Main Desk.

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