



City of Stevenson

Planning Department

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TO: City Council
FROM: Ben Shumaker
DATE: December 15th, 2022
SUBJECT: HEALing SCARS Program Guidance

Introduction

The presence of septic systems within the city threatens surface and ground water quality; decreases the supply of buildable land; limits the number of users contributing toward the sewer system's operations, maintenance and development; and stretches the means of homeowners through unexpected repairs. The Helping Adjacent Landowners Sewer Connection and Replumbing Stipend program considers providing City financial assistance when septic systems are abandoned and properties are connected to the public sewer system.

This memo asks for City Council guidance on key aspects of the conceptual septic-to-sewer program before final documents are brought forward for approval consideration

Guidance Points

The following elements of the conceptual program require guidance:

1. Should property owners who allow their system to fail have access to this program's financial assistance?
2. Should City financial assistance from this program include loans?/Should the City become a lender?

Failed Systems

System failure means the drain field from a septic system is no longer able to sufficiently pass water. Failure begins immediately upon installation. Among other factors, failure is accelerated when tanks are not pumped, when heavy traffic compresses drain field soils and when vegetation disturbs drain field lines. Proper stewardship of a system therefore involves periodic pumping and protection of the drain field from harm. Even in those cases, septic systems will fail. Failure is anticipated in the review and permitting of septic systems by setting aside reserve areas where a new drain field can be placed upon failure of the first. When a system fails within 300' of a public sewer, connection to the sewer is required regardless of a reserve field's presence.

The current draft anticipates competition for a small fund and excludes failed systems from eligibility. However, even though the failed systems would be compelled to connect, the burden would be great and access to the program would be appreciated.

Decision Point #1: Should property owners who allow their system to fail have access to this program's financial assistance?

Loans

Cities in Washington are generally limited in their ability to lend public credit. However state statutes provide a limited authority for the City to act as a lender for septic-to-sewer programs. This authority is not currently exercised nor has any other loan program been created. If adopted with the HEALing SCARS program, City staff would not have comparable programs to turn to, nor would they be able to easily incorporate into other processes or systems. The administrative burden is therefore unknown. If not operated as a loan program,

expenditure of these funds could still be made as a grant program for “the poor and infirm”. A grant-only program would limit access to the funds’ resources, perhaps to the point where it goes unused.

The current draft includes loan agreements, liens, and other documents related to a lending program. (Note: A previous draft contemplated a grant-only program available to all as a contract for performance related to improving water quality, public health, and wellbeing. The City Attorney advises against that form of program).

Decision Point #2: Should City financial assistance from this program include loans?/Should the City become a lender?

Next Steps

Staff will take any guidance offered by the Council and build it into a final review draft of the HEALing SCARS program documents.

Prepared by,

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