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Halifax Regional Council
July 31, 2007

TO: Mayor Peter Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY: Julia Haincastle
Dr. Wayne Stobo, Chair
for Halifax Watershed Advisory Board

DATE: July 20, 2007

SUBJECT: Septic Tanks in HRM

ORIGIN

Under the recently approved Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (RMPS) for HRM, dated June 2006, the following is quoted from page 132, Section SU-20 of that report: *"To protect public health and the environment HRM shall investigate a means to ensure that on-site sewage disposal systems are maintained"*

RECOMMENDATION

The Halifax Watershed Advisory Board recommends Halifax Regional Council:

1. Establish an inspection and monitoring program for all septic tank systems. Develop a mandatory pump out program for all septic tanks operated by qualified persons. This includes a transparent reporting system with the required record keeping, identifying the status of each operating septic tank system. Inspectors would report on and take action with any septic system found to be out of compliance with the provincial standards for septic tanks.
2. Develop/expand the required sludge handling systems for septic wastes.
3. Develop a program that addresses remediation of all mal-functioning septic systems in a timely manner.
4. Hold discussions with N.S. Environment and Labour aimed at developing a coordinated system related to the inspection, monitoring and maintenance of septic tank systems.
5. The definition of "maintained" as contained in the HRM planning strategy is recommended by the Board to mean a fully functional and effective septic tank disposal and treatment system that meets the design standards for the treatment of normal household sewage on a continuous and uninterrupted basis.

DISCUSSION

The Halifax Watershed Advisory Board fully supports the initiative contained in the planning strategy and recommends an action plan be developed. We believe it is important that the action plan regarding inspection and routine maintenance of septic tanks be developed and properly administered by government/qualified inspectors. There are provisions in the RMPS for HRM to assume this function from the provincial government. The local citizens are impacted the most by a degradation of the water resources and HRM must develop an action plan aimed at protection of these water resources for the benefit of future generations and all life forms that depend on these fresh water resources.

BACKGROUND

The Province of Nova Scotia estimates there are 400,000 septic tanks operating in the province. Even with many residents in HRM being serviced by central sewers, it is estimated there are a minimum of 40,000 septic tanks in HRM.

Septic tanks are installed/managed under regulations administered by the Department of Environment and Labour. The provincial regulation for On-site Disposal systems are contained in the Provincial Environment Act and the Health Act, and were first approved in 1995, with the latest amendment passed in October, 2001.

There is no mandatory inspection process for the installation of all new tanks and tile fields and more importantly, there is no program administered by any level of government that ensures all existing septic tanks are pumped out at the required intervals (the current recommended standard is 3 years). The average cost for this service is \$300.00. The province estimates the average life of a septic tank/tile field system is twenty-five years. The projected life can be enhanced by regular maintenance of the system. This includes periodic cleaning/pumping of the septic tank. This pump-out program has major financial benefits to the owner of the septic system.

Older septic tanks installed before 1995 do not adhere to the current regulations and many/most mal-functioning systems are not routinely identified by inspectors. There are provisions in the current on-site disposal regulations to take action on mal-functioning septic tank systems. At present, this provision of the regulations has not been adequately enforced by government officials. As a result, these existing systems are allowed to operate without regard to their environmental impacts. Over time, the cumulative impact of these mal-functioning systems results in environmental damage to our water resources and generates potential health risks for our citizens.

The province of Nova Scotia is currently sponsoring a pilot Environmental Home Assessment program that includes an evaluation of wells and septic tanks. One of the main focuses of the program is to educate the home owner with regards to proper care and maintenance of their private wells and septic tanks.

This provincial program is managed by a third party. Information collected by the home assessor (third party) is confidential and remains with the community group who is delivering the program. The Provincial Department of Environment and Labour will not have access to the assessment reports

on individual septic tanks unless the property owners bring the information to their attention. For persons earning less than \$50,000/year, a grant of \$3,000.00 to repair/upgrade the septic systems is available from the province. This could represent 20% of the cost of the overall improvement/replacement system. Relatively few people in HRM have applied for this grant. The overall budget for this province wide program is \$850,000.00 and will be completed over a two year period.

Note: The cost of the required repairs/upgrades for the homeowners will be significant, especially for older septic systems. Currently the cost of these repairs/upgrades is the responsibility of the property owners, since these facilities form part of the capital assets of the residential complex. These water supplies and septic systems are essentially private utilities requiring regular maintenance to remain fully functional. Many home owners may not have access to the required funds to complete the necessary improvements to their septic system.

There are health, environmental and economic benefits associated with establishing this septic tank inspection and maintenance program. These include:

- Properly operating septic systems will have minimal impact on our water resources,
- There is a reduced risk of spreading water borne diseases to humans and animals that may come in contact with waste products from mal-functioning septic tanks,
- Properly maintained septic systems will last longer and will save money for the property owners,
- The longer the septic tank systems remain operational, the lower the potential demand for piped sewers and water system from the residents. This represents a tremendous cost saving opportunity for HRM and the province.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

The budget implications associated with the recommendations have not yet been identified. Any associated budget implications would need to be determined by HRM staff and disclosed to Regional Council in a subsequent report.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES / BUSINESS PLAN

This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Capital and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Capital and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

ALTERNATIVES

None suggested.

Additional copies of this report, and information on its status, can be obtained by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.
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