

Northwest Michigan Onsite Wastewater Task Force 501(c)3

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Northwest Michigan Onsite Wastewater Task Force (now - 2008 - Onsite Wastewater of NW MI) From The Chair 2003

[This speech was given by Chair: John Kelley at the General Meeting held December 11, 2003 at the Little River Band of Ottawa Indian Tribal Community Center, Manistee.]

I would like to thank everyone for attending today's meeting. I would also like to thank the Little River Band of Ottawa representatives for allowing us to use their facility.

My name is John Kelley and I am the Chair for the NWMOWTF and a land use planner for Long Lake Township in Grand Traverse County. I would like to start by telling you why Long Lake Township is interested in onsite wastewater treatment.

Long Lake Township is one of the fastest growing townships in Grand Traverse County without public sewer or water. Long Lake Township has many natural features that attract residents. These include several lakes, scenic vistas, open space and forested areas.

To date this year Long Lake Township has issued 116 land use permits for single-family homes and 33 land use permits for renovations of cottages and summer homes many of which are located on lakeshore properties. These renovations included the installation of new septic systems.

The population of Long Lake Township is expected to grow by about 5,200 persons by 2025, resulting in about 1,900 additional housing units. The added housing will consume about three square miles of area, if current development patterns persist.

In terms of impact on the environment including water quality, if the growth and development continues in the township, the effects of that growth will degrade the very resources that attract residents. In addition, as the Township's namesake and its signature feature, the continued health of Long Lake will be critical to the long-term future of the community. From a planning and zoning perspective, management strategies, which may help to mitigate the impacts of these land uses include establishing set back requirements to increase system nutrient absorption capacity, require system inspection and upgrade upon sale of property to integrate best available technology, and consider implementing shoreline buffer zones to enhance nutrient utilization,

As a land use planner, one of the issues that frequently dictate discussions for development in an unsewered Township concerns the treatment and disposal of human wastes. Recognizing the importance of this subject, the scarcity of factual information readily available to local decision makers, and the incomplete understanding among municipal and county officials about reliable alternatives to standard individual

Mission Statement:

To increase awareness that water quality is directly linked to the use of appropriate wastewater systems and their management.

septic systems, it is crucial that we develop and implement ways to manage the effects of onsite septic on surface and groundwater, and work to mitigate the effects that are already present.

History

My involvement with the Task Force began in February of this year. The Task Force, however, was organized in February of 2002 when Gourdie-Fraser Inc., a civil engineering firm based in Traverse City, invited a broad spectrum of individuals to participate in a roundtable meeting to discuss septic tanks, water quality and regulations. Since its establishment the task force met to exchange information related to county health codes, alternative technologies, financing of wastewater infrastructure and water quality protection. The task force encompasses a 10 county area where approximately 85% of the existing homes in this region use septic systems because most rural areas and small communities are not served by municipal sewer systems. Recognizing the need to pursue this matter, the Task Force conducted elections of board members in February 2003 and adopted the following mission statement:

"It is the mission of the Northwest Michigan Onsite Wastewater Task Force to encourage preservation and enhancement of water quality through adoption of appropriate technologies and operation and maintenance of onsite wastewater treatment systems. We will serve as a nonprofit clearinghouse for education, information on technology, regulation, and applications in northwest Michigan."

- The major goals of the Task Force include the following:
- develop and implement regulatory schemes to protect and enhance water quality
- provide specific, timely and credible information to county sanitarians
- provide information to realtors, developers, property owners and the general public
- encourage replacement of failing septic systems and holding tanks with alternative onsite systems, where alternatives are affordable

To accomplish these goals, the initial focus of the Task Force includes four objectives:

Organizational Capacity

The first objective of the Task Force is to bolster the organization's capacity to share existing information among the respective sectors concerned with these issues and with the public. This will be accomplished by building and maintaining a dynamic database and website, supporting accountable governance of the Task Force, building communication tools that can be used by Task Force members as spokespersons in public forums, and supporting grantwriting and programming efforts designed to assure sustainability of the organization.

Let me emphasize that the financial support of *The Joyce Foundation of Chicago* has made it possible for the Task Force to undertake serious work and look at ourselves as an ongoing organization. I will describe the Joyce Foundation grant in a few minutes. While the Task Force is proud of our successful application to the Joyce Foundation, we are not sitting on our laurels. We have also applied for grants from the Kellogg Foundation and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. Unfortunately, both of those were unsuccessful. We have a number of other possible grants that we will be seeking for funds needed for this year's operations, and we expect we'll ask the Joyce Foundation for a second year of support. In the long term, we will always rely on outside support, which must come from government or private grants or from contracts for services or possibly from membership fees.

Research

The second objective is to collect information relevant for policy-making that is not readily available in comparable form across the 10 counties represented by the Task Force. Additional information available from such sources as the National and Michigan Onsite Wastewater Recycling Associations and National Small Flows Clearinghouse will be identified and made available by internet links. Research that is presently underway, such as that being done by Michigan Technological University under a Joyce Foundation grant, will also be collected and referenced in the information database.

We will focus our research on the Northwest Michigan region, investigating such matters as the following: health department budgets, county septic regulations, local population projections, the age of existing homes and septic systems, availability and suitability of alternative systems, water quality, and all aspects of septic pumping and disposal, including costs.

Communication

The third objective of the Task Force is to broadly disseminate our findings and our original contributions through news media, publications, constituent meetings, a speakers bureau, legislative hearings and participation in selected regional and/or national conferences.

In this first year, we haven't yet gotten into our research agenda, so our communication program is somewhat limited. As we produce information in 2004 and beyond, we'll share that information every chance we get. In fact, we will hope to get specific grant support for our communication program.

Demonstration Projects

The fourth objective is to plan, execute and evaluate up to four demonstration projects within the 10 counties of northwest Michigan represented by the Task Force. These are opportunities for practical demonstration projects and policy strategies that can be replicated throughout the Great Lakes region.

Rather than develop a hypothetical solution, for instance, to maintaining the water quality of an inland lake, we could work with the lake property owners association, the county planning commission, several townships and an existing board of public works to explore formation of a special assessment district to own and operate a wastewater system around the lake. Also, we might find a public alternative septic system that we could use to demonstrate to the public the proper operation and maintenance in order to protect public health and the environment. These demonstration projects will have to be communicated if we expect other communities to benefit from them.

To address these goals and objectives, the task force membership by resolution authorized the newly elected officers and directors to adopt a constitution and bylaws, to establish a not for profit corporation, which included applying for recognition under Section 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code and to initiate efforts to obtain grant funding for the purpose of carrying out work consistent with our mission statement.

Grant Award

In April of this year, then Chair Harry Luzius and John Hagen of Gourdie-Fraser along with direction from other board members applied to the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation. The Joyce Foundation supports efforts to protect the natural environment of the Great Lakes, and, in addition to the grant to the Task Force, it has also supported programs of the Michigan Land Use Institute, based in Beulah, and wastewater researchers at Michigan Technological University, in Houghton.

In a August of this year the Task Force was awarded a \$110,000 grant from The Joyce Foundation. The grant enables the Task Force to pursue our goals and objectives, in an accountable fashion. Our secretary-treasurer, Dendra Best, has modified our initial proposed budget to be consistent with the funding awarded by The Joyce Foundation. Our goals and objectives are now contractual obligations that we must diligently pursue for the public good. The documentation of our stewardship of these funds is required for The Joyce Foundation and for the Internal Revenue Service.

As we publish annual reports and issue news releases about our activities, we need a broad base of constituents to keep us on the frontiers of knowledge and action. We need your involvement to help guide our agenda, within the Task Force mission.

Vision/regional and Statewide goals

Our common interest is in replacing failing septic systems with alternative technologies that have been demonstrated to be effective but which are not specifically permitted under health and environmental regulations in Michigan.

A serious effort to achieve this goal in Michigan will produce documentation of the harmful impacts of failing septic systems and lead to regulatory schemes that will assure proper operation and maintenance of alternative systems to protect water quality.

Recently, the Task Force board of directors held a strategic planning retreat to consider 3 to 5 year visions of the board. Consensus of the board members was to:

- Assist in the development and implementation of a statewide septic code
- Continue to seek a variety of funding for sustainability of the organization
- Consider professional staffing and office space for the Task Force
- Continue to provide quarterly meetings, panels, seminars and news events.
- Continue to act as a state and regional clearinghouse for dissemination of information.
- Engage policymakers at local health departments, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency.
- Consider partnerships with allied organizations, including realtors, property owners, engineers and sanitarians
- Consider expanding the Task Force's geographic reach to include other county health districts.

While the Task Force was initially formed by wastewater engineers, it is clear that the composition of the board, and the composition of the Task Force membership, is much broader. That is because we recognize that the challenges are not simply engineering challenges, but are challenges that involve public health, the environment, cost, fairness among the population, future growth and development, planning, zoning, government relations and leadership. We think we are on the right track with a team of leaders behind the Task Force.

Experience/Board Members

The Task Force, in just over a year, has gained valuable experience as an organization representing many interests working toward common goals. Members and officers include wastewater engineers, public health sanitarians, onsite system manufactures and distributors, township planners and zoning administrators, environmental organization managers, grant writers, realtors, developers and lake association members.

With that said, I would like to introduce them to you at this time.

Vice Chair Janet Person, cannot be with us today because of a previous commitment is executive director of the Antrim County Conservation District and has extensive experience with federal, state and private grants.

Secretary-Treasurer Dendra Best, who is a trustee of the Village of Bear Lake, a board member for the Manistee County Library.

Peter Read, of Century 21 Realty, who attends every meeting of the Grand Traverse County Board of Public Works, and who represents fellow realtors as a member of the Environmental Committee of the Traverse Area Association of Realtors.

Anne Brasie cannot be with us today because of the demands of several grant deadlines. Anne is executive director of The Watershed Center Grand Traverse Bay.

Bill Crawford is Director of the Benzie-Leelanau Health District. Many believe that these two counties have the most progressive septic regulations in the region.

Krysti Baker is Zoning Administrator for Green Lake Township in Grand Traverse County, and she also has extensive experience from Washtenaw County in septic regulation.

Chris Updegraff is Manager of Western Concrete Products, in Cadillac, and his professional work in operation and maintenance of onsite systems keeps him on top of developments, along with his training at Michigan State University.

I am proud to work with these officers and board members, and I'd like to ask you to give them a hand for the hard work and great job they're doing.

Only by regional participation and education can we fulfill our shared role of community stewardship. We invite you or your organization to become active in the Task Force.

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