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City Council

Briefing on the Urban Septic Assessment Project

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Title

Briefing on the Urban Septic Assessment Project

Recommended Action

Committee Recommendation:

Not referred from Committee

City Manager Recommendation:

Receive information about work completed to date and consider potential future directions.

Report

Issue:

Update City Council on work completed by the regional work group. Prepare for Councilmember Langer's participation in the LOTT Clean Water Alliance annual retreat and the related agenda item.

Staff Contact:

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Presenter(s):

Sue Davis, Thurston County Environmental Health

Lisa Dennis-Perez, LOTT Clean Water Alliance

Andy Haub, P.E., Water Resources Director

Background and Analysis:

The 16,000 onsite septic systems in use by residents of the three local cities and their urban growth areas pose a threat to public and environment health. However, converting onsite systems to municipally-operated sewer systems is financially challenging for residents, the local cities, and Thurston County.

Onsite septic systems are used effectively in rural settings. The growing conflict between onsite septic system use and our increasingly urban landscapes has become a recognized problem. In June 2011, elected officials of the four local jurisdictions participated in a "Septic Summit" convened by the LOTT Clean Water Alliance. Technical presenters at the summit explained how septic systems work and why the systems create public health risks when used to serve contemporary urban land use

densities. Participants at the summit recognized the problem and encouraged staff of the four jurisdictions to work together to develop potential regional options for reducing our reliance on septic systems. Conveying sewer to water quality treatment facilities through municipal sewer systems is preferable in urban settings. The minutes from the Septic Summit provide a summary of the discussion (attached).

Staff from the four local jurisdictions and the LOTT Alliance have worked since 2011 to better understand our options. The distribution of septic systems in the urbanizing area and their associated risks to both groundwater and surface water has been further evaluated and refined. Regional staff have researched programs implemented by other municipalities in the United States to convert onsite systems to sanitary sewer. Legal and financial consultants have helped define opportunities, constraints, and implications. During September, staff is sharing findings of the work effort with their respective elected officials.

Olympia's "Septic to Sewer" Program

The City of Olympia recognized the challenges associated with onsite septic systems in the Council-adopted 2006 Wastewater Management Plan. The Plan restricted the installation of new onsite systems and initiated the Wastewater Utility-supported "Septic to Sewer" conversion program. The program provides staff support, financial incentives, and capital project funding for individual residents and neighborhoods interested in converting to municipal sewer. A link to the City's webpage regarding Septic to Sewer Conversions is attached.

The City's "Septic to Sewer" program provides residents with an effective avenue to discuss and understand their onsite system and the City's sewer system. Very few new onsite systems have been installed in Olympia since 2006. Between 2009 and 2013, residents choose to connect to sewer at an average rate of 17 systems per year. Unfortunately, only 5 residences have elected to connect to sewer in 2014.

LOTT Alliance Upcoming Discussion

The LOTT Alliance Board of Directors will discuss the outcomes of the urban septic assessment project and potential next steps during their annual retreat on September 27th. Olympia Councilmember Langer is Chair of the Board of Directors. The retreat discussion will address potential next steps including regional coordination, level of response to the problem, and the need for a second Septic Summit.

Neighborhood/Community Interests (if known):

Onsite septic systems have public and environmental health implications to our community. Approximately 1,980 septic systems are used within the City limits. Another 2,180 are located in the Thurston County/Olympia Urban Growth Area. Converting onsite systems to municipal sewer is complex and costly.

Options:

N/A

Financial Impact:

None at this time.