

ANSWERS TO COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SANITARY ASSESSMENT FEE

Why is this fee being charged?

In 2000 the State of Wisconsin changed the State plumbing code, which the County is required to administer. The changes require that all septic systems, regardless of how old, must be inspected by a qualified individual at least once every three years. If the accumulated solids in the tank(s) occupy more than 1/3 of the tank volume, the tank contents must be pumped. Holding tanks are septic systems that are serviced as needed, which can occur more frequently than once every three years. *The County is required to compile a database of all septic systems located in the County and send notices to those owners due for inspection and pumping to make sure that it is completed and reported to the County once every 3 years.* The State did not provide any money to the County to do this additional work.

If this has been mandated since 2000, why are we first being charged now?

Most counties have not been immediately able to comply with this requirement. Statewide, there are large numbers of systems with no records at all because they were installed before there was recordkeeping of any kind by counties, and strategies for collecting and managing the huge task needed to be developed. Some counties contracted with software companies to develop their tracking systems (one county paid over \$350,000 for software and development) and are now charging fees anywhere from \$15-\$23 per year. Sheboygan County is using existing software and the creativity of current staff to develop its database and tracking system (which is saving many thousands of dollars), and is now ready to implement it full-scale.

About 1/3 of all County systems have been monitored so far; fees are necessary to offset the costs of ongoing data management and additional staff time for monitoring all of the approximately 9000 systems.

What is the purpose of this State law?

To protect the health and safety of State residents and to protect the ground and surface waters of the State, it is important to make sure that wastewater or effluent from the septic system is being treated properly, and to identify septic systems when they are not functioning correctly. If a failing septic system contaminates drinking water, it can affect many more people than just the owner of the septic system.

Why is this fee a separate charge and not included with the regular taxes?

Over half of the properties in Sheboygan County are served by public sewer systems and are subject to sewer bills (including tax exempt organizations), whether they are located in a City, Village, or Town sanitary district. The County Board decided that it was more equitable for people that have septic systems to pay the cost to support this program.

What is the difference between a tax and a special assessment?

A tax is a blanket charge against all properties in the County; it cannot be charged against tax-exempt organizations such as churches and other governments. A special assessment is a separate charge that can be made directly on a tax bill for specific parcels, such as any parcel served by a septic system.

Who decided to charge this fee?

The Sheboygan County Board of Supervisors, on the recommendation of its Resources Committee and the County Planning Department, adopted Ordinance 6 on September 27, 2005. However, keep in mind,

monitoring the septic systems is required by State law and is not optional. The fee is intended to cover most of the costs for the County to meet this requirement.

What exactly is the money being used for?

Since 1984, new non-holding tank septic systems have been required to report servicing every three years. This is approximately 3,500 systems. Thus far, the cost has been absorbed by the County. It appears from an initial inventory that there are almost 9,000 septic systems in the County, of which approximately 8,300 must report servicing at least every 3 years. This is more than double what has been handled to date. The money will be used to:

1. Complete an inventory of septic systems in the County.
2. Track every inspection, maintenance and/or servicing event for EVERY system.
3. Set up a procedure to phase in all septic systems that have not yet been required to complete maintenance at least once every three years.
4. Mail out notices to all property owners having septic systems due for pumping and inspection on a quarterly basis, with those due during the winter months given ample time to have the work done in warmer weather.
5. Review and file the reports as they are returned.
6. Follow-up with property owners when septic systems with problems are identified.

I have a holding tank, so I don't have a septic system.

Holding tanks are privately owned septic systems and therefore are included in the fee. In fact, while other septic systems are only required to be pumped every 3 years, holding tanks must be pumped whenever they are full. Pumpers are required to report holding tank pumping to the County every 6 months, so there is actually much more cost involved with the County maintaining records for holding tanks. Additionally, the County must confirm that holding tank owners maintain servicing contracts with licensed pumpers. This requires additional correspondence and recordkeeping whenever a property served by a holding tank is sold or whenever a property owner decides to change pumper. Until now, that cost has been paid for with general taxes by everyone in the County.

I have a mound system, not a septic system; or, I have an in-ground system, not an above ground system.

Regardless of what type of system is installed on your property, it is a septic system. The only properties not having septic systems are those that are connected to public sewer systems, or those buildings that do not have plumbing in them, such as barns and sheds.

What happens if I don't pay the special assessment?

State law requires that special assessments be paid first when taxes are paid. If you do not include the \$7.50 when you pay your taxes, the special assessment will still be taken from your payment, and your property taxes will show an unpaid amount of \$7.50, which will accumulate interest and penalties until paid.