

# SEPTIC SYSTEMS

## Where does your waste go?

Managing what goes down your drain and into the environment...

If you are one of the many homeowners who relies on a septic system, you should know that regular maintenance of the system is essential to its proper functioning and the health of the local environment.

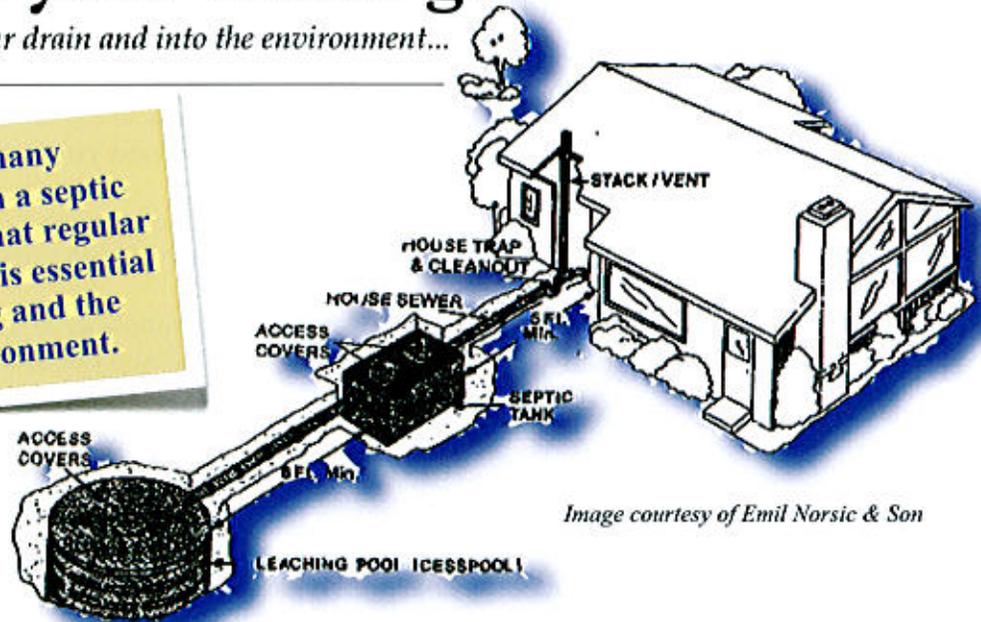


Image courtesy of Emil Norsic & Son

While it may not be a pretty topic, "down the drain" waste management is an important issue for East Enders. It can be easy to forget that waste doesn't just disappear down the drain - it ends up in our backyards, groundwater, and local surface waters.

With this in mind, we must be careful about what we put down our drains and also protect the ecological systems that filter this waste.

Most homes on the East End deal with "down the drain" waste, either through on-site cesspools, septic tanks, or connection to community sewer systems.

For septic system owners, when water goes down the drain it flows through a series of pipes into a septic tank usually buried in the yard. This tank holds wastewater and allows some wastes to either sink down or float up, while the relatively clear water in the middle is slowly piped out into a leaching ring system (see figure).

However, this relatively clear water still contains nutrients (which can be harmful to the bays) and can contain chemicals you use in your home (which can also be harmful to the natural environment).

Septic systems need maintenance to ensure that this process continues smoothly. Tanks need to be pumped out so that the solids and scum can be removed from the bottom and top of the tanks. Also, at times older tanks may need to be replaced, upgraded, or moved to a more appropriate location (this often means being moved further away from surface waters). If this maintenance is not kept up, major problems such as septic tank leaks, overflow, or failure may occur. When this happens, not only is there often an expensive mess for homeowners to clean up, but there is also a strong possibility that pollutants and excess nutrients are reaching our local surface waters and contributing to nutrient loading, which causes unhealthy conditions such as algal blooms, and fish die offs.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO: Protect Local Ground and Surface Waters

- How do you know if/when your septic system needs to be pumped out or replaced? Get your septic system inspected right now (especially if it has been awhile since you last did this) and create a maintenance calendar for future pump-outs and inspections!
- On average, septic tanks need to be pumped out every 3 - 5 years, however this varies a bit with the size of the tank and number of people relying on it. Consult a professional to determine your needs.
- If your system needs to be replaced, try to do it right away if you can. The resulting mess of a septic failure can be much more costly to both the bays and your pocket.
- Conserve water and stop any faucets that are leaking or toilets that are running. When excess water runs down the drain, it can overload your septic system.
- Make sure your septic system is as far from the water as possible.
- Eliminate or at least reduce the chemicals that go down the drains in your home. Natural alternatives can be just as effective and are less harmful to the environment as they make their way through your septic system and out to our local bays. Also make sure grease does not go down drains as it can clog up septic systems.
- Eliminate garbage from your drains. Flushing solid materials clogs up the septic system and can lead to problems -- this also means avoiding use of garbage disposals.



### Local Rebates and Assistance Programs:

Southold Town currently has no septic tank pump-out or replacement rebates. Please contact your town supervisor and elected officials to request that they consider septic tank pump-out rebates, inspection programs, and replacement rebates for failing systems, or a revolving loan program to support homeowners' efforts.

### For Service on Your Septic System:

Look in the yellow pages under "septic tanks and system cleaning" or call your local chamber of commerce to find a reputable service provider in your area.

#### Links:

Peconic Estuary Program  
[www.peconicestuary.org](http://www.peconicestuary.org)

Peconic Baykeeper  
[www.peconicbaykeeper.org](http://www.peconicbaykeeper.org)

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