

8-5-11 To Be or Not to Be at Your Perc Test

You've chosen your engineer and I am there to witness the perc test. Everything will be done correctly. I guess that is why most people are not in attendance to watch the perc test at their property. There's a lot to be learned, though, and sometimes, you can make some choices.

I like to ask why we are doing this. Are you selling? Do you know for sure it is in failure? I ask that for several reasons. Elderly people have told me that it is just the right thing to do and they want to get their affairs in order. Sometimes they have not even had the system inspected and they want their children who inherit the place to have one less thing to worry about. How about one less thing for the parent to worry about?

If you tell me the toilet sometimes backs up and you are spending a fortune on getting it pumped, or else it overflows; the system needs to be replaced.

Sometimes we don't know the condition. The toilet flushes and there is no lush green grass anywhere or signs of overflow. The official inspection will tell you where the components are, the condition of them and whether or not it passes.

Once it has been determined that the system needs to be replaced, the first step is to conduct a perc test. The test, following a specific method spelled out by the Department of Environmental Protection, involves timing the rate at which water percolates down through the soils. By the time we are done, we know what kind of soil we have; about how big it will be in square footage and whether or not it will be in the ground or above.

We'll even have a rough idea of its cost. The least expensive system can use the existing soils and can flow by gravity from house to tank to "D" (Distribution) box to leaching area without a pump.

Sometimes we can raise the plumbing in the cellar enough to get all that piping starting off at a higher point, and it would cost less to raise the plumbing than put in a pump chamber. If you are there, we can enter the cellar and talk to you about this option.

When we can't use some of the existing soils because it was just too "tight" or hard, those silty or clay soils will need to be removed and sand will be brought in to replace them. That is called a remove and replace and adds to the cost.

Lots of people don't understand why a raised leaching area is needed. If you are there, we can point out the marks left in the soil indicating where the groundwater rises to in the spring. We have to use that area as the starting point for determining where the bottom of your leaching area will be and we build up from there. That separation is what keeps our ground water safe.

If your system has to be raised, we can tell you that day; about how high out of the ground it will be, if we will need walls to hold it in or if we have room to grade it out with soils. Sometimes the yard is so small; the raised system takes up the whole yard. There are other times, though, when the mounded leaching area takes up part of the yard and we have choices as to where it is placed. Do you want it go front to back, along a side property line, so that you have some yard left? Would you prefer that it run along the rear property line? If we have those choices, you might as well be involved in them.

The more informed you are and the more you participate in choices, the happier you will be with the outcome. And if you are not happy, at least you can more quickly adjust because of your understanding of the process and why it is what it is.

Are you selling? You can participate in making this system look as good as possible, which will be better for your sale.

Are you the buyer? You can find out what you are buying and avoid the surprise of a mounded system going in after the closing when you were told, "Money is in escrow, we have an approved plan, and it can be replaced any time in the next two years. Sign here. Initial there. Sign there."

One distraught woman called my office to explain that there must be some mistake. She had purchased this cute cottage with a yard and now it has this big walled-in thing instead of a yard. After explaining the reasons for the mound and why we had no other choice as to where to place it, I made a suggestion. I asked her to put some chairs up on top and when she sat there, she would now have a view of the East Monponsett Pond, over her neighbor's fence and she would enjoy the breeze there.

She called back to say she tried my suggestion and was glad she did. She was happy and had settled in. She also had learned something. She would never again buy a house needing a septic repair without getting more information to let her know the whole story as to what she was buying.

I counted ten reasons to be there for the perc test. How many did you count?

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. You can contact her to talk about perc tests at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us.