

03-14-08 Setting The Stage

This is the time of year in New England when the earth and all its inhabitants are working behind the scenes to get ready for spring. It is really a very exciting time when you think about it. It may look drab on the exterior and it may be easy to ignore it as simply something to get through but it is, in reality, a time of quiet revolution.

Below ground the bulbs are getting fat with life. Migrating birds have begun to reappear with a ravenous appetite after their long flight and in preparation for their soon to follow time of reproduction. It is the trees that always get my attention first. By the beginning of March, they begin to take on lovely colors that can be noticed at a great distance. Weeping willows begin to resemble golden fountains and the birches take on a rosy glow as the buds begin to swell. All this happens before a single flower opens or egg hatches, unless you live at Annisnappit Farm in Plympton where the hens decided they could not wait until spring and two of them decided to have eight chicks each. They are now getting all kinds of attention.

That's how it is with boards of health, too. The big acts get all the attention but, in reality, there is a lot going on all year round. Boards of health are always reading, researching and attending to the latest developments. Sometimes months or even years go by in preparation for a new regulation or policy. And that's the way it should be. Unless it is an emergency, time spent on policy development is time well spent.

Take for instance the new technology for reviving failing septic systems. Haven't heard of it? Well, you will soon, as it is probably the first time a new and well-founded idea has come along for septic systems in a very, very long time. The first idea was to get it out of sight. It was, literally, a "disposal system". Our carbon copy permit applications still say "Disposal Works Permit Application". While initially our intentions influence our choice of words, our choice of words also influences our thinking.

The second concept was to treat the effluent to make it safe enough to join the groundwater. The goal was to build it close to the surface and sufficiently above ground water to allow the effluent time to be treated by oxygen and the electrical activity that would take place between the grains of sand. The thinking behind septic treatment systems has been trying to take hold but the old thinking of disposal is still well rooted.

In addition to the current goal of treatment before disposal, research has finally been presented offering the hope and the possibility of saving a failing or clogged septic system's leaching area without digging up and replacing everything. The revival is achieved through bioremediation. The combination of dissolved oxygen achieved by aeration and the introduction of bacteria capable of changing the biology of the effluent are achieving fantastic results when carefully and appropriately applied to a system.

The careful and appropriate application are key concepts here. To add a method of revival to a system sitting in the groundwater, to one with a structurally unsound tank or one with decrepit decaying orangeburg pipes and/or a crumbling distribution box might be tempting as a cost saving technique but it would be misleading at best for the local board of health to permit such an activity. The board of health that looks very carefully at DEP's permit for bioremediation will see not only the wisdom of careful site and design considerations but also the necessity of it. With that said, the same board that is careful about permitting this new technology also looks forward to the satisfying results of helping the environment and being able to allow people to save money.

The concept of bioremediation is not new. It was many years ago that we heard of bacteria being used to eat up oil spills. Only months ago I received notice that bacteria would be applied down the street from my office to remediate groundwater contaminated with petroleum. The same concept is now being applied to septic systems. An aeration device is dropped down into the existing or newly replaced tank. Attached to that device is a bag of bacteria designed to dissolve over the course of a year and eat up the clogged biomat, allowing the leaching area to once again function. The technology works so well that when I heard of it a few years ago it was actually called the “Piranha”, just like the infamous fish. Business related differences and spin-offs ensued shortly thereafter and there are now several brand names with similar bioremediation technology permitted by DEP.

The Halifax Board of Health spent months and many meetings discussing the DEP permits and the technology before arriving at a policy to guide the permitting process for this idea so full of hope and possibilities.

I hope you will keep this in mind when construction is slow and you wonder what the local board of health is doing when there isn't much construction going on. I hope you will keep this in mind when you hear of a board of health announcing a new policy or regulation. The meetings leading up to those announcements are public meetings. You are entitled to attend them, to offer comments and to ask questions. You are entitled to witness the process of setting the stage. Most of the work is behind the scenes but it is very important work. It results in the birth of ideas intended to help people and their environment. Much of the work done by your local board of health is very much like the work of late winter and early spring. It is very important and necessary but it does not garner much attention. That's okay; it leads to good things. It is the beginning of new things to come, just like early March in New England.

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