

# A HOMEOWNER'S BILL OF RIGHTS

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Judging from the marketing hype, there are no shortages of sustainable green solutions for wastewater infrastructure. But does the reality bear out these claims? Can we safely reclaim and reuse treated wastewater for landscaping our yards and gardens? Can we help save Chesapeake Bay using treatment technologies that provide advanced nutrient reduction? Is the cost affordable to the average homeowner? How do we know?

The answer for home onsite septic systems is that we really don't know. Though standardized testing from organizations such as NSF are used to "certify" treatment units as capable of achieving specified treatment standards, in practice we just assume that they do. Neither public agencies or homeowners are willing to pay the costs of the intensive monitoring and testing that would be required to verify field performance. So at best, we have limited inspection protocols and in many cases none at all.

Perhaps of even greater concern are the ongoing sometimes hidden costs required to keep these systems operating. There are often expensive "surprises" that must be incurred several years down the road. Without maintenance, we can forget performance. When buying a home, state disclosure laws typically require prospective buyers to be informed as to whether the home is on septic or sewer – a yes/no box to be checked. That's usually it for disclosure.

The intent of public disclosure law is to insure that all "material facts" are made known to prospective buyers, with material facts defined as "anything that would influence a buyer's decision to purchase or the price paid to purchase". So, you be the judge – do these expenses qualify as "material facts" about a home onsite septic system?

- The **electrical** usage for some treatment systems will cost \$250 to \$350 per year while others may require a fraction of this cost.
- Local health departments sometimes require regular **inspection** by a certified operator at a cost of \$250 to \$300 per year.
- **Pumping** the septic tank or treatment tank must typically be done every 3 to 5 years at a cost of \$300 to \$350 per pump out.
- Some **blowers** need to be replaced every 5 years at a cost of \$500 or more. Other blowers last twice this long.
- **Pumps** may need to be replaced every 10 to 15 years at a cost of \$500 each.
- **UV bulbs for disinfection** must be replaced at least every one or two years at a cost of \$200 or more.
- The **media** in some treatment units must be replaced every 8 to 10 years at a cost of \$2,000 or more each cycle.

And the list goes on.

By the time you add it up, you can easily average over \$1,000/year or more to properly maintain onsite treatment systems over their useful life, particularly those claiming advanced treatment. In our book, this is “material” and compels disclosure based on this criterion alone. Two additional factors make full disclosure even more compelling:

1. Cheaper Initial Cost Products often have Higher Ongoing Operating Costs – Except for repair or upgrade of existing septic systems, homeowners are seldom the decision maker regarding which onsite septic system is installed. Instead, homebuilders make these decisions and they are totally driven by minimizing initial costs. Homebuilders bear no responsibility for ongoing operating costs and therefore, performance and life cycle costs are seldom, if ever, considered.
2. Homeowner Budgeting Realities – How many homeowners do you know that budget for and specifically set aside money to cover costs for expenses likely to be incurred over the next 3 or 5 years? Certainly, not many. Therefore, when a pump or blower go out and need to be replaced or a septic tank pumped because of an emergency, or the media needs to be replaced to maintain treatment performance, homeowners are faced with the need to spend an unplanned \$300, \$500 or \$1,000 and more from already stretched budgets. The bigger the expenditure, the more challenging the problem. Human nature being what it is, these expenditures are typically the lowest of priorities for homeowners. Therefore, any opportunity to defer or avoid these unplanned expenses will be taken. Why replace a blower or media if sewage still flows through the system and I can still flush the toilet? So, performance suffers.

Only through life cycle costing and the evaluation of long-term performance can we better understand these issues.

To add even more accountability, in addition to requiring disclosure of expected life cycle costs, perhaps disclosure of the septic system designer, manufacturer, installer and health department personnel approving the installation should also be considered.

To insure sustainability, its time for a Homeowners Bill of Rights! **Sustainable performance requires informed choices.**

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