

Central Frontenac Septic System Maintenance & Assessment Program Frequently Asked Questions

In 2013, the Council of Central Frontenac created the Septic Re-Inspection Committee of Council in response to concerns about risk of contamination of well water and deteriorating water quality in our lakes. The mandate of the committee was to research the dangers of failing or failed septic systems on human health, the environment and the economy and to find a low cost, effective and convenient way to assess the septic systems in Central Frontenac.

The committee has completed its work and has recommended that Council implement the Central Frontenac Septic System Maintenance and Assessment Program. What follows is a list of questions and answers that explains the program.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does the Central Frontenac Septic System Maintenance and Assessment Program work?

This program will be rolled out in 2 phases.

In Phase 1 (the data collection phase of the program), homeowners will be asked to have their septic systems assessed and encouraged to do necessary maintenance and repairs on their systems. The most convenient and cost efficient way to accomplish both of these will be to have septic pumpers and haulers do the assessment at the time of a pump out.

Pumpers and haulers will be licensed and trained by the township to do assessments on septic systems. During the pump out, they will do a visual assessment, leave a copy of the assessment with the homeowner and will send a copy to the township.

Systems will be assessed as green, yellow or red. A green designation means that the system is working properly and that the homeowner does not have to do anything. A yellow designation means that the system needs minor maintenance or repairs. With a yellow designation, the township would follow up with phone calls enquiring whether recommended repairs or maintenance had been completed. If not, the homeowner would be encouraged to do the repair or maintenance. A red designation means that the pumper/hauler thinks that the system has failed or is failing. With a red designation, Public Health would be notified and they will follow their own protocols to ensure the system is functioning properly.

We also anticipate that when an owner becomes aware that their system needs major repairs they may immediately contact the Township, Public Health or a qualified septic system contractor before follow-up contact is actually made by Public Health.

Phase 2 will start five years after the implementation of Phase 1. Homeowners who have not had an assessment of their septic system filed with the municipality will be contacted by the township and encouraged to have their tanks pumped and an assessment made. Failure to do so within a reasonable time will result in a mandatory inspection authorized under the Ontario Building Code Act at the homeowner's expense.

Is there a problem with water quality in Central Frontenac?

Waterfront residents have been reporting for years that water quality in lakes is deteriorating as evidenced by increases in weed and algae growth. Some even say that they no longer swim in their lakes.

This experiential evidence is corroborated by water quality surveys conducted by the Conservation Authorities. In general, the quality of surface water in Central Frontenac is deteriorating. By comparison, water quality in Otty Lake in Lanark County, which has a mandatory septic inspection program, is improving.

The quality of ground water, from which well water is drawn, is a little more difficult to assess. Although the Health Unit does free testing on well water, not all residents take advantage of this testing program. As well, results from testing are not publicly available, so there is no way for the township to know about the quality of ground water.

However, a joint study done in 2014 by Queens University and the Ontario Public Health Lab found that “human feces is the primary contributor of private well water contamination in Southeastern Ontario.” Ensuring that septic systems are working properly is an inexpensive way to limit the possibility of drinking water contamination.

I already have my tank pumped out regularly. How will this program affect me?

If you are having your tank pumped regularly (every 3 - 5 years is recommended) and your pumper/hauler has not identified any problems with your system, the only effect this program will have is a small assessment fee added to your pump out fee.

How much is the assessment fee?

The assessment fee will be set by the pumper/hauler. Pumper/haulers contacted regarding this program estimate a charge in the range of \$25 - \$100.

On the other hand, an independent inspection with no pump out is estimated to range from \$95 (plus transportation) - \$300. If the homeowner prefers to have an independent assessment, he/she is free to do so as long as the independent inspector is licensed to operate in Central Frontenac. The independent inspector’s report would need to be submitted to the township.

How often should I have my tank pumped out?

The “best practice” recommended frequency of pump out is 3 to 5 years for systems with normal usage. The frequency should be increased for high usage systems.

What is included in the assessment?

- a) Is vegetation present on the septic field (e.g., shrubs, trees, etc.)?
- b) Is septage ponding on the surface?
- c) Are tank lids in place and intact?
- d) Are tank baffles in place and intact?
- e) Are effluent levels at the weir of the outlet pipe prior to pumping?
- f) Are scum and sledge levels appropriate for the tank size and use?
- g) Does effluent run back into the tank from the outlet when pumping?
- h) Are there obvious cracks in the tank?
- i) Does the concrete show signs of deterioration?

I have a holding tank which is pumped 2 or 3 times a year. Will I need to have an assessment each time?

No. Assessments are necessary only once every 5 years.

My closest neighbour is a mile away and there are no water bodies on my property. Why should I care if my system isn’t working perfectly?

Besides the fact that you are putting you and your family’s health at risk, you are also risking contaminating other wells in your area, even if they seem far away. Because Central Frontenac is situated on granite bedrock with many cracks, it is easy for untreated effluent to get into the groundwater. The aquifers that hold the well water can extend for miles in any direction. You might not be able to see your neighbour’s house, but your failing septic system could still be contaminating their well.

I live on an island. Getting my tank pumped would be very expensive. Will this program force me to get a pump out?

No. All that this program requires is that your septic system be assessed by someone licensed by the township and that the assessment report be submitted to the township. You can hire an independent inspector to do an assessment and forward the report to the township. However, if the assessment report indicates that maintenance or repairs are required, you will be expected to do the maintenance or repairs.

What happens if I don't get my tank pumped out or assessed during Phase 1 of the program?

If you do not have your tank pumped out or assessed, there will be no assessment report at the township. Once Phase 2 of the program starts, if the township does not have an assessment report on your system, you will be encouraged to get an assessment. Failure to do so within a reasonable amount of time will result in an inspection done under authorization of the Ontario Building Code Act at your expense.

What happens if I get my tank pumped out by a pumper/hauler that is not licensed by the township?

Only pumper/haulers licensed by the township will be submitting assessment forms to the township. Once Phase 2 of the program starts, if the township does not have an assessment report on your system, you will be asked to get an assessment from someone licensed by Central Frontenac. If you fail to do so within a reasonable amount of time, you will be required to have an inspection done under authorization of the Ontario Building Code Act at your expense.

I have a tertiary septic system. Do I need to get my system assessed?

No. Tertiary systems have inspection contracts with the manufacturer. Submitting a copy of the manufacturer's inspection report to the township will be sufficient.

Will I be required to upgrade my septic system to the current Building Code?

If your septic system is functioning (either a green or a yellow designation), you will not need to upgrade your system. However, if your system is flagged as 'red,' a follow-up inspection will be required and if it is determined that repairs or replacement are required, they will need to conform to applicable Building Code standards as may be required for your house or cottage.

What if my septic system is flagged 'red' and the Health Unit says it is not working? Will I have to replace my system? How much would that cost?

The Building Code states that it is the responsibility of homeowners to ensure that their septic systems are functioning properly. If the Health Unit inspects your system and determines that it needs to be replaced, you will be required to replace the system.

A full system replacement is usually \$10,000 - \$15,000. In discussions with local contractors who install septic systems, replacing a septic tank typically costs \$3000 - \$5000. Replacing a leaching field typically costs \$5000 - \$7000.

What if I can't afford to repair or replace my septic system? Will I be forced to move out of my house?

A Septic System Inspector for the KFL&A Health Unit said that in his 30 years of experience, he has never seen this happen. A failed septic system is a violation of the Building Code Act and must be fixed, but Public Health will work with the homeowner to find a solution.

It's my septic system on my property. What authority does the township or Public Health have to check my property or force me to do something to my system?

A failing or failed septic system is a hazard not only for you but for those in the community around you. The mandate of Public Health related to drinking water is to help ensure the safety and well-being of everyone in the community. If your system is putting others at risk, Public Health, as the designated Principal Authority (appointed by the Township of Central Frontenac under the Ontario Building Code Act), has the authority to inspect your system and to ensure that remedial actions are done. As stated above, Public Health will work with you to address your specific situation and circumstance.

I'm a responsible homeowner. I take care of my septic system. Isn't this just another unnecessary intrusion into the private lives of decent citizens?

As a responsible homeowner who does regular maintenance on your septic system and your system is functioning properly, the only impact that this program will have on you is a relatively low assessment fee once every five years. This added fee though, will help ensure all other homeowners are also being responsible. Unfortunately, at this time, we have no information to confirm what portion of the population are properly maintaining their septic systems.

The Township's reason for wanting to know that all systems are being maintained properly is because a faulty system can cause real on-site contamination problems for residents or off-site contamination/pollution for neighbouring wells and the environment. The Township has a responsibility to take reasonable action under both the Municipal and Building Code Acts to protect its residents, visitors and the local environment from water pollution sources generated by human activity. We believe the proposed program efficiently and effectively helps address this responsibility.

Once the program is implemented, all septic systems in Central Frontenac will be assessed to ensure that all systems are functioning properly. Wouldn't it be worth \$25 - \$100 every five years to not only know that your system is functioning properly but also that your neighbour's system is working and not contaminating your well or the environment?

Other examples of government involvement in the private lives of citizens:

1. E-test: every 2 years for vehicles older than 7 years.
2. Car safety: if you want to sell a car, you must have your car checked.
3. Leaky oil tank: If your oil tank is leaking, the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change will make you remove it and clean up any contamination at your expense

Questions, comments, concerns and suggestions can be sent to:
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