

5 Myths & Facts about Septic Systems & Drinking Water

Prepared by Montgomery Coalition to Stop Sewer Sprawl

Montgomery County (Maryland) is updating **the 2017 - 2026 Ten-Year Comprehensive Water Supply and Sewerage Systems Plan** (Water and Sewer Plan). The full Council is expected to vote on the updates on March 6, 2018. The Water and Sewer Plan guides waste treatment and drinking water service for Montgomery County. At stake: our ability to support the Agricultural Reserve and the low-density adjoining areas which protect our drinking water.

Below are some false myth that obscure the fact that sewer line extensions promoted in the 2017 Water and Sewer Plan threaten drinking water for 4.3 million Washington, DC area residents.

Myth No. 1: Septic system failure is widespread, and there is no reasonable remedy to this problem short of replacement with sewer systems.

FACT: There is no documentation to support the claim that septic system failure is widespread. The County does not currently maintain a comprehensive database of septic problems throughout the county,

MYTH NO. 2: Septic systems should be replaced by sewer service to protect our drinking water and the environment.

FACT: Once sewer service is brought into an area previously served with septic systems, water quality and the environment inevitably degrade. The saga of damages from urbanization linked to sewer service includes: sewer pipeline and roadway construction; forest removal and filling of small streams and wetlands; construction mud pollution; increased impervious surfaces resulting in increased stormwater runoff; and raw sewage spills and leaks from sewer pipes and pumps, resulting in increased stream contamination.

MYTH NO. 3: Septic systems contaminate our drinking water with raw sewage and nitrogen while sewer service does not. Therefore, the county should have a policy that promotes sewer service.

FACT: Sewer systems, not septic systems, are a threat to Montgomery County's drinking water supplies. Sewer systems frequently overflow into streams, including drinking water supplies; in total over 9 million gallons of raw sewage overflowed from WSSC sewer lines in the last 3 calendar years.

MYTH NO. 4: Septic systems put our watersheds into jeopardy; they should be replaced by sewers to protect the environment.

FACT: Septic systems that are properly sited, designed, installed and maintained can provide excellent wastewater treatment and are part of the rural and low-density infrastructure associated with our highest-quality, cleanest streams and groundwater wells. In contrast, sewage pollution from sewer pipes and pumps is a major widespread problem (see MYTH NO. 3)

MYTH NO. 5: Sewer systems comprise the best and most modern sanitation method for everyone, everywhere, while septic systems are obsolete.

FACT: Public sewer systems are not "modern" - they date back to ancient Rome. Raw sewage leaks, seeps, and spills from sewer systems in Montgomery County remain ever-present public health hazards: in WSSC's service area, over 9 million gallons of raw sewage overflowed from sewer lines in the last 3 calendar years (2015-2017).