

Bills would require nutrient-removal septic systems

By JACK SHAUM
Staff Writer

CHESTERTOWN — The Chester River Association is backing legislation in the General Assembly to require septic systems capable of removing nitrogen from wastewater in all new homes built statewide.

Conventional septic systems cannot remove nitrogen, which is "extremely harmful" to the Chester River and the Bay, the CRA said in an e-mail to its members, urging them to support the legislation.

Biological Nutrient Removal systems (BNR) that can remove nitrogen are being made available to homeown-

ers through a state program funded by the Bay Restoration Fund, commonly known as the flush tax.

Queen Anne's County currently requires BNR systems for all new construction within critical areas — the first in the state with such a requirement, said Chester Riverkeeper Tom Leigh. Queen Anne's County and Kent County constitute the bulk of the Chester River watershed of 390 square miles.

HB 176, the House of Delegates version of the bill, and SB 554, the Senate version, state that "a person may not install an on-site sewage disposal system in the state unless the on-site sewage

disposal system utilizes nitrogen removal technology."

It goes on to say that the Maryland Department of the Environment "shall assist homeowners in paying the cost difference between a conventional on-site sewage disposal system and a system that utilizes nitrogen removal technology with money from the Bay Restoration Fund."

"I'm certainly optimistic" about the legislation's chances for success, Leigh said. "This is one of my main agendas." He said he believes the legislation has support among some of the legislature's environmental leaders.

Current homes on septic systems will not be affected by the legislation, the CRA said.

A hearing was held on HB 176 on Feb. 4 before the House Environmental Matters Committee at which CRA Executive Director Bob Parks testified on its behalf. Leigh will testify in favor of SB 554 at a Feb. 24 hearing before the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee.

In its e-mail, the CRA asked members to contact Del. Dick Sossi, R-36-Queen Anne's, who sits on the House Environmental Matters Committee, urging him to vote for the bill as written.

"I'm pretty sure I can't support the bill as written," Sossi said. "I would like to see some performance information (on the BNR systems). There hasn't been enough time yet to have that."

He said he feels the legislation is "well-intentioned," but that investing in cover crops to cut down on pollution would bring "more bang for the buck." Sossi also said a shortage of contractors to build the systems is an issue as is long-term maintenance of them.

"If people don't maintain them, then you can have worse pollution," he said.

The Department of the Environment has had in place for some time a pro-

gram that covers the entire cost of the BNR system for homeowners who want to upgrade their septic systems.

Information on the program, including downloadable application forms, is available by logging onto MDE's Web site at www.mde.state.md.us/Water/CBWRF/osds.

Leigh will hold a seminar on the new septic systems this Saturday, Feb. 21, from 1 to 3 p.m. It will be open to the public and will go into detail on how BNR systems work, and will include input from system manufacturers and installers.

Information on the seminar is available by calling the CRA at 410-810-7556.