



WICOMICO WATER & SEWER COMMITTEE

Wicomico Water & Sewer Committee of the
Greater Salisbury Committee

Whitepaper

Failing septic systems throughout Wicomico County and outdated, at-capacity wastewater treatment plants in the County's smaller municipalities are fast becoming a problem. It's time to address this problem – holistically. It is time, simply put, for Wicomico County to create a Wicomico Sanitary Commission, with a full-time director, and staff, dedicated to solving this problem.

Wicomico County is the only county in Maryland that does not have a county-wide department dedicated to managing wastewater. It's time to change that. Since the 1960's, studies have been prepared – by the County government, by private architecture and engineering firms on behalf of the County, and by organizations like the Greater Salisbury Committee (GSC) – to look at this problem. Unfortunately, most if not all the recommendations in those studies have not been implemented.

Recently, GSC formed a committee of knowledgeable and experienced experts to help Wicomico County implement its latest effort: a Water and Sewer Master Plan initiated in 2019 by the County Executive with support from the architectural and engineering firm George, Miles & Buhr (GMB). In 2021, the Master Plan was finalized and accepted by the Wicomico County Council. This white paper written by GSC's Wicomico Water & Sewer Committee summarizes the plan's goals and objectives and recommends the critical actions needed now to achieve them.

What lies ahead for Wicomico County and its residents, regarding water and sewer, and failing septic systems? How will our smaller municipalities pay for upgrades to their current wastewater facilities? What will the financial toll be on both county residents and local governing bodies? Where and how can these expensive and needed upgrades get funding? What are our state and federal partners prepared to do to help? How will homeowners pay for either a new septic system, or hook up to a municipal system? Are homes in Wicomico County that are currently dealing with septic issues losing value? These questions, and many more like them, must be addressed.

Bringing Wicomico County into the sanitary sewer service business will not be easy, or inexpensive. Nor will it be done overnight. But with the right tools and talent, it can be done, and the benefits will outweigh the costs. Here's how we can start.

What is the problem?

In Wicomico County there are approximately 18,000 septic systems. The Wicomico County Comprehensive Water and Sewer Plan includes a map of "Sewer Problem Areas" which are areas with known failures and further potential for septic systems to fail. When septic systems

fail, high concentrations of nutrients and bacteria can enter the groundwater and surface water. In Wicomico County, drinking water is pumped from underground aquifers using wells. Shallow aquifers that are unconfined, or part of the groundwater table, are subject to contamination from septic system failure. In Wicomico County, most residential wells installed prior to 2000 are in unconfined aquifers. Septic system failure can cause contamination of the drinking water source aquifers and lead to a public health emergency. Nutrient-laden septic effluent is also a primary contaminant of local rivers, contributing to murky waters unfit for fishing and swimming. Estimates suggest that the problem is worsening and will not improve on its own.

What did the Water and Sewer Master Plan recommend?

The Master Plan recommends two paths for elimination of septic systems depending on the location of the septic system and existing municipal water and sewer infrastructure. In locations where a septic system can be reasonably served by a nearby municipal system, the recommendation is for the municipality to extend its infrastructure to serve the septic system area. For rural villages, the Master Plan recommends that the County provide the utility infrastructure to serve those areas. Of the nearly 18,000 septic systems in the County, the plan shows that there are approximately 5,000 septic systems in rural communities that the Master Plan identified for service from new regional systems, and approximately 10,000 septic systems that could be served by existing municipalities.

Both paths recommended in the Master Plan are complex to implement. There are legislative, regulatory, financial, and technical components. A multi-faceted approach is necessary to implement the plan. This document provides a high level overview of the key next steps and considerations for implementation with the ultimate goal of eliminating failing septic systems and septic systems with a high probability of failure.

What is Wicomico County's role?

For the Master Plan to be implemented successfully, Wicomico County needs to be the driver and the entity responsible for the County's water and sewer utilities. The County must first officially define the purpose of the initiative, which is to correct existing septic and sewer system failures in Wicomico County. Since the corrective action is not intended to induce growth, the State will likely require that the County commit to only serving existing development. The purpose of the project should be adopted by the County via resolution at the outset, referencing the local and state visions, and environmental goals.

A Sanitary Survey that documents the location and type of septic systems that are failing or are at risk of failure can be used to determine planned service area designations consistent with existing policy, while considering financing and equity. The County should then publicly justify the need. Through the Sanitary Survey and other research, data should be summarized about septic and sewer system problems, water quality and public health risks, financial considerations, citizen concerns, and the feasibility or practicability of service based on projected changes in land use and climate. The Master Plan and other data sources should be supplemented with the information required to accurately describe the problem to be solved.

The County should use this information to proactively involve County residents in its deliberations and help move the conversation from why solutions are needed to what they are and how they should be implemented.

Once the need and public support are fully demonstrated, the County should formally resolve to act. The County should pursue the necessary State legislation to create a Sanitary District which has the authority to oversee public water and sewer facilities in Wicomico County. The Sanitary District shall need to be created under Title 9, Subtitle 6, of the Environment Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland. The Wicomico County Sanitary District (WCSD) shall be responsible for establishing the framework to expand the role of the existing Wicomico Urban Services Commission. This will enable the creation of new Urban Service Districts which will include areas of septic systems adjacent to existing municipalities. New infrastructure that collects and transports sewage in these districts may be connected to existing municipal treatment facilities, or new centralized systems, pending applicable local and state land use and environmental protection permissions. The WCSD will also be responsible for setting up the new government entity to design, build, own, maintain, and operate water and sewer facilities which include Wastewater Treatment Plants (WWTPs), water treatment plants, sewer collection systems, sewer pumping stations, water distribution systems, water towers, and drinking water wells.

Who should lead the County's implementation efforts?

Wicomico County needs to hire a Sanitary District Administrator or the equivalent of a CEO to develop the WCSD structure and organization. The Administrator will develop the Business Plan which provides the road map for the governance structure.

The plan will define the financial structure which will include evaluating scenarios for various numbers of customers and ensuring that the systems can be a self-sufficient enterprise fund. Thorough consideration of service area alternatives, proposed treatment methods, and local and state requirements will help surface the most viable scenarios. The County should emphasize that the project is intended to result in no net burden on the County's general budget or on non-served taxpayers.

It will be challenging to have the system be financially feasible in the early years when there is a small customer base. The financing strategy shall identify grants and loans for design and construction of systems including funding dedicated sewer extensions to connect to existing municipalities. User rates shall be evaluated to cover ongoing operation and maintenance costs as well as treatment costs assessed by municipalities that serve septic areas. Hiring operations staff versus hiring a management company is a key decision that needs to be thoroughly evaluated. Additionally, the Administrator needs to understand and prepare to meet all permitting and policy requirements for both construction and operations of the systems.

What actions items should be accomplished in the first 100 days of 2023?

1. Adopt a purpose statement for the initiative by County resolution.

2. Establish an Advisory Committee of knowledgeable and experienced experts.
3. Draft a Scope of Work informed by the Advisory Committee and others that includes timing, policy, and cost considerations for:
 - a. The Sanitary Survey and other information required to accurately describe the problem.
 - b. Citizen involvement in validating problems and informing solutions.
 - c. State legislation to create the Wicomico County Sanitary District.
 - d. WCSD staff, including a CEO-level Administrator.
 - e. A Business Plan, that includes service area and treatment alternatives, wastewater policy compliance measures, and governance, operations, and finance strategies.

Where do we start?

The Master Plan may take a decade or more to fully implement. To build momentum and pilot future implementation strategies, it is important to identify and implement two early-win projects, one rural and one urban. The two representative projects can reveal challenges and opportunities valuable in helping prepare to deliver durable and effective solutions county-wide.

Before the two projects are decided, Sanitary Survey and other data is needed to justify the highest need areas in the County. This includes data about septic system failures, water quality and public health risks, financial considerations, citizen concerns, and the feasibility or practicability of service based on projected changes in land use and climate. Public input is also needed in these areas before committing to proceed.

Pittsville

For the urban sector, the Town of Pittsville is undergoing a WWTP upgrade and expansion project. The design includes providing capacity to serve the septic systems in nearby Parsonsburg. Pittsville desires to extend sewer service only, not water service. Based on Pittsville's willingness to serve an adjacent community under the structure of an Urban Service District and since they are already in the process of implementing the necessary WWTP upgrades, this project is recommended for the urban sector, pending review and consideration by the public.

Mardela Springs

For the rural sector, the recommendation in need of further public verting is to serve all existing properties within the incorporated Town of Mardela Springs. Mardela Springs is the only rural sector project that falls in an incorporated area. Having the structure of a Town government in place will facilitate decision making and outreach to property owners. Additionally, the Wicomico County Board of Education (WCBOE) owns a WWTP for Mardela Middle and High Schools which has a stream discharge permit. This is a unique opportunity to partner and serve the Town utilizing an existing discharge point, which will potentially simplify State permitting requirements. Other options for Mardela Springs should also be evaluated such as shared systems with either Hebron or Sharptown, or developing a new standalone WWTP.

What is the Wicomico Urban Service Commission's role?

The Urban Service Commission can establish a sewer service district for Parsonsburg and enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Pittsville. Once services are extended, the Commission can invoice residents in the district for service. Invoices would have a collection system component for Wicomico County and a treatment component for Pittsville.

The Urban Service Commission can establish a sewer service district for Mardela Springs and enter into MOUs with Hebron, Sharptown, and/or the WCBOE.

How will Wicomico County fund implementation?

Once a project scope of work and budget has been determined, the County can apply to various State and Federal funding programs. Maryland has the State Revolving Fund (SRF) for Drinking Water and Clean Water projects, and for wastewater and other systems, the Bay Restoration Fund (BRF) is eligible to counties that document and adequately plan to correct septic failures while meeting state Priority Funding Area and other requirements. The United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA-RD) has the Water & Wastewater Disposal Loan and Grant Program to provide funding for clean and reliable drinking water systems and sanitary sewage disposal to households and businesses in eligible rural areas. Additionally, Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development could be utilized for utility extensions.

What resources can the Greater Salisbury Committee Wicomico Water & Sewer Committee provide?

The Committee's mission is to help Wicomico County implement the Water and Sewer Master Plan through education, advocacy, support, and subject-matter expert recommendations.

The Committee will present the white paper recommendations to Wicomico County after the elections in November 2022. After that time, the Committee will assist the County Executive at his/her discretion with formalizing the initiative's purpose and justification, evaluating policy and implementation considerations, and involving partners and the public in viable solutions to wastewater treatment problems in Wicomico County.

THANK YOU!

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