

Findley Lake Septic Systems (a.k.a. Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems) Frequently Asked Questions

Why is Chautauqua County Health Department (CCHD) concerned with septic systems around Findley Lake?

Many properties have shallow ground water tables with septic systems in loose gravelly soils which means wastewater leaving septic tanks reaches the groundwater table quickly. The leach field (adsorption bed) of a septic system must be at least two (2) feet above seasonally high groundwater so soil and microbes have a chance to filter / adsorb pathogens, nutrients, and other contaminants.

Many dwellings began as small, seasonal cottages with limited water use. In recent years dwellings have grown in size so more people are staying in them and using appliances like dishwashers, laundry machines, large tubs, etc. that create more wastewater and can overload septic systems.

How many properties within 250 feet of Findley Lake shoreline have no record of a septic system being installed or have a permitted septic system that is older than 30 years?

Within the proposed sewer district, a total of 196 properties either do not have a record of a septic system on the property (130) or have septic systems older than 30 years (66). These properties are subject to the Mandatory Inspection Program and should receive direct communication from CCHD in Fall 2023. If you would like to know what information is on file for your system please call our office at 716-753-4481.

The program is ongoing which means every year the list of properties older than 30 years will change slightly. A system that was installed 25 years ago will be subject to the Mandatory Inspection Program in 5 years.

Based on previous inspection data the CCHD expects a significant number of the unpermitted systems around the lake are seepage pit systems; these types of systems do not provide good wastewater treatment and are typically not approved for new or replacement systems.

If the proposed district is not formed, when will the County begin inspecting septic systems around Findley Lake?

Chautauqua County Health Department (CCHD) has already identified properties that meet the criteria for the Mandatory Inspection Program. If a sewer district is not formed and there is no immediate plan to move forward with a municipal sewer option, CCHD will begin contacting property owners in Spring 2024 to verify the information on record and explain the inspection process.

If the County inspection reveals that septic system corrections are required, how long will property owners have to correct their system?

Corrections will often require the entire septic system be replaced because new components will not be allowed on unpermitted systems. If a failure is documented on a permitted system, individual components may be replaced in

specific circumstances. Once a violation is documented owners are typically given three weeks to obtain a permit and three more weeks to have the system installed. The timeline may be extended if the dwelling is not occupied or does not present an immediate public health hazard. Corrections that require a licensed professional engineer to design and oversee a new system installation will require additional time.

Will holding tanks be allowed to correct a septic system violation?

Under New York State standards, holding tanks will be considered for *temporary use only*. If a sewer district is formed and municipal sewer plans are in process CCHD may allow holding tanks as a temporary solution until municipal sewer infrastructure is available. Holding tanks do not make sense for properties occupied by renters because renters do not understand the maintenance and monitoring requirements.

What is the average cost for upgrading an individual septic system? (based on 2023 costs)

Costs vary depending on the type of correction required, site access, site topography, lot size and offset distances between septic system components and the lake, water wells and groundwater. On small lots that cannot achieve required offsets, a licensed professional engineer is required to design and oversee the installation.

If local contractors and CCHD staff are able to satisfy size requirements and separation distances required for a conventional system, installation costs will range from \$8,000 to \$16,000. If size requirements and separation distances cannot be satisfied, a professional engineer will be required to design and oversee the installation of a system. To replace an entire system on a small lot that cannot achieve offsets, installation costs range from \$25,000 to \$35,000 plus engineering costs, which add another \$5,000 to \$8,000.

Note that these costs may increase for lots with poor access and steep slopes. Some systems may require an enhanced treatment unit or other specialized treatment components that have mechanical pumps and motors which require routine maintenance and service contracts.

Will phosphorous loading to the lake be eliminated if property owners upgrade septic systems?

The 2008 NYS Department of Environmental Conservation study suggested septic systems within 250 ft. of the Findley Lake shoreline contributed 45% of the annual total phosphorus to Findley Lake between 2003-2007.

The only way to completely eliminate septic systems as a source of nutrient contamination is to install a central collection system and treatment plant with a discharge outside of the watershed. Septic systems, even newly designed and installed systems are not designed to completely eliminate nutrients.

How much does it cost to maintain a septic system?

Conventional system with a septic tank - Tank should be pumped out every three (3) years to prevent solids from building up. Additional pumping may be required if systems are over loaded.

Systems with an aeration motor and/or pump tank - Requires bi-annual maintenance of the aeration motor, maintenance of pump tank motor and electricity to run motors and alarm features.

Professionally engineered systems – May include specialized service contracts, filter media change outs, and /or electricity.