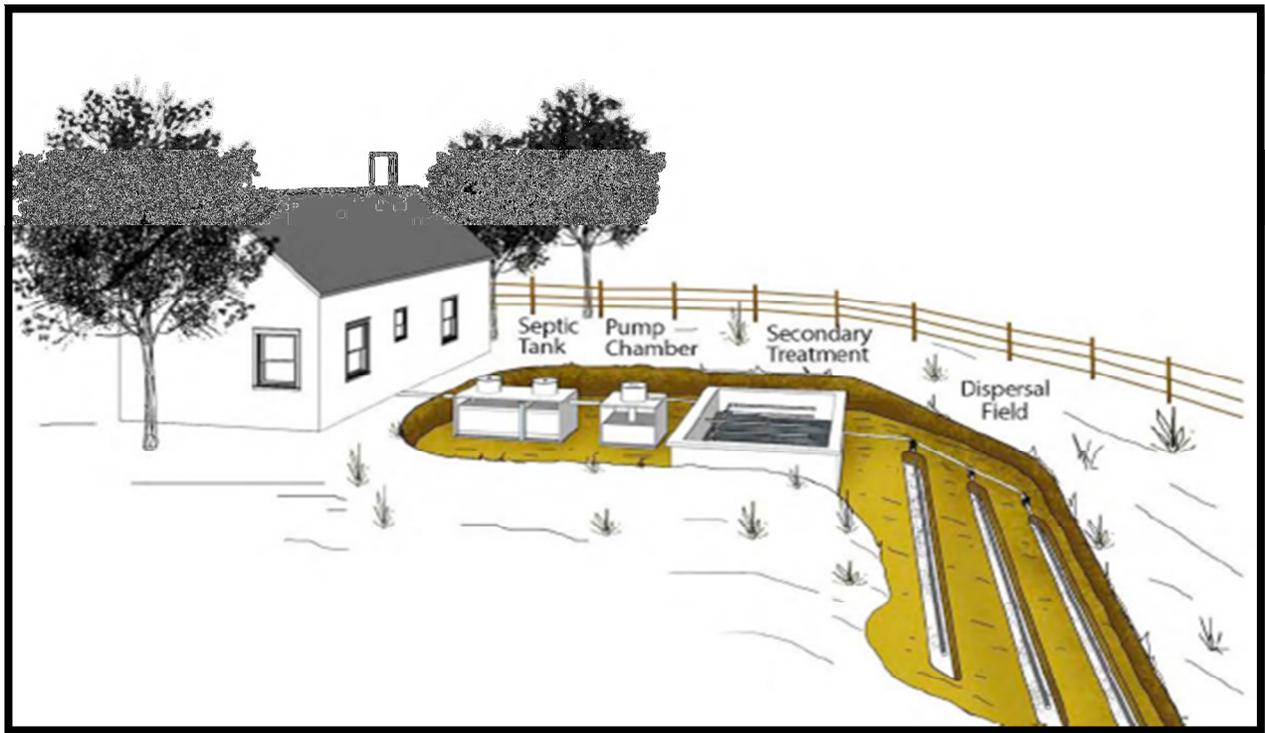


***Introducing the NEW***  
**Santa Clara County**  
**Onsite Wastewater Treatment System**  
**Ordinance**



**Frequently Asked  
Questions**

Santa Clara County  
Department of Environmental Health  
1555 Berger Drive, Suite 300, San Jose, 95112  
408-918-3400  
[www.EHinfo.org](http://www.EHinfo.org)

## **1. How does the new Septic System Ordinance affect me?**

For homeowners with existing functioning septic systems, there is no change. A homeowner would be impacted if there was a major remodel on the house (over 500 square feet) and/or other development on the property such as a secondary dwelling or accessory structure with plumbing fixtures.

## **2. Why a new Septic System Ordinance now?**

In recent years, there have been breakthroughs in the septic system industry that allow improved treatment of the septic system sewage right on the homeowner's property. Thus, the new term "Onsite Wastewater Treatment System" is the industry standard.

## **3. What is the difference between 'septic system' and 'onsite wastewater treatment system' (OWTS)?**

Nothing. The term 'septic system' has been replaced in the industry with 'onsite wastewater treatment system' to reflect the changing technologies in the onsite industry. Conventional septic systems installed 30-40 years ago were designed primarily as disposal systems, the newer technologies actually treat the wastewater to make it cleaner than conventional technology.

## **4. What are the major changes in the new ordinance?**

The new ordinance modernizes construction standards and siting requirements for the disposal of wastewater on site. It allows for alternative treatment technologies to be implemented in Santa Clara County. The new ordinance eliminates the minimum lot size requirements for Lexington Basin area. The requirement for a separate septic system for secondary dwellings is eliminated. Monitoring and reporting programs will be implemented for alternative systems.

## **5. What are the benefits of the new ordinance?**

The new ordinance improves environmental and public health protection through more advanced technology, adds flexibility for variable site conditions (steep slopes, high groundwater), and provides improvement for OWTS operation, maintenance and homeowner awareness.

## **6. What is the difference between a conventional and alternative septic system?**

A septic system is a small-scale sewage treatment system common in areas with no connection to a municipal sewer. A septic system processes and neutralizes liquid and solid waste that exits your home from toilets, sinks and other plumbing fixtures.

A conventional septic system consists of three main parts: Septic tank, drainfield and soil beneath the drainfield. An alternative system requires engineering considerations beyond a conventional system, to address limiting site conditions (high water table, impervious soil, rock layer, etc.) and/or proper effluent treatment. Most alternative on-site systems combine the basic elements of conventional septic systems with other more specialized components, such as filters or aerators.

## **7. What are the predominant alternative treatment technologies available?**

Alternative septic systems typically use one of two treatment technologies – either some sort of filter (sand, fabric, peat) or an aerator.

**8. Have these new technologies been tested and are they safe?**

Alternative treatment technologies have been around for over 40 years and are no longer considered experimental. The Regional Water Quality Control Board and the Department of Environmental Health will review and approve those technologies that will be used in Santa Clara County. Typically, those components will have an NSF certification (National Sanitation Foundation).

**9. Will all new construction require alternative treatment?**

No. Conventional septic systems will still be the preferred method of disposing and treating of wastewater on site. Alternative systems will be an option to homeowners if certain setbacks cannot be maintained, such as separation to high seasonal groundwater or steep slopes.

**10. If my septic system is failing, will I be required to install a system with alternative treatment?**

No. As long as there is sufficient area to repair the septic system that meets all setback requirements using conventional technologies, alternative technology will not be required.

**11. Will I be required to upgrade my septic system when I sell my house?**

No.

**12. Currently, any accessory structure (barn, pool cabana, etc) containing more than two plumbing fixtures (including guest houses) requires its own separate septic system. Will these structures also be allowed to connect to the existing septic system for the main house?**

Yes. If the septic system for the main house is up to current code (septic tank, diversion valve, two leach field systems), is functioning properly (a current septic pumpers report would be required), and is large enough to accommodate the additional waste, the accessory structure can connect to the existing system. Upgrades/changes to the septic system most likely will not be required.

**13. So if a homeowner wants to add a secondary dwelling, it can connect to the existing septic system for the main house?**

Yes. However, the secondary dwelling would be considered an additional bedroom (or two) and the leach fields may need to be expanded. Under the current and proposed ordinance, the leach fields are sized both on the percolation rate of the soil and the number of bedrooms in the structure.

**14. Will all septic systems require an operating permit?**

No. Only alternative treatment systems will require an operating permit. The operating permit will require monitoring and reporting of the septic system, typically by a person certified by the manufacturer in inspecting these systems.

**15. Will the County require me to pump my septic tank and what will happen if I do not pump it?**

No. However, the County highly recommends all residential septic tanks be pumped every three to five years. This requirement is not codified in the new ordinance; however, letting solids accumulate in the septic tank over time will cause a septic system failure. Septic failures are very costly as they usually require abandoning the existing leach field and finding another area on the parcel suitable for the installation of a new leach field.

#### **16. How much does an alternative septic system cost?**

The initial cost will vary depending on the type of technology used. Alternative septic systems are basically miniature wastewater treatment plants, with technology and machinery that can be as complex as those in large municipal systems. They can cost roughly \$15,000 for a basic system or more than \$40,000 for a more complicated system involving mechanical pumps or a mound.

17. Under the current ordinance, the Lexington Basin area and the City of Los Altos Hills have septic system regulations that are different from the rest of the County. Will this change?

Yes. One goal of the new OWTS ordinance was to develop one ordinance for the entire county. Therefore, there has been a collaboration between the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, the City of Los Altos Hills and the Lexington Basin area to develop standards and policies that will standardize the way OWTS systems are designed, constructed and maintained throughout all of Santa Clara County.

#### **18. Where can I get additional information on the new septic system ordinance and the Environmental Impact Report?**

The new ordinance and EIR are available on the Department of Environmental Health website, [www.ehinfo.org](http://www.ehinfo.org).

#### **19. What can I do to maintain my septic system?**

- Do not put too much water into the septic system; typical water use is about 75 gallons per day for each person in the family.
- Do not add materials (chemicals, sanitary napkins, applicators, and so on) other than domestic wastewater.
- Restrict the use of your garbage disposal.
- Do not pour grease or cooking oils down the sink drain.
- Know the location of your septic tank drainfield and repair area.
- Install a watertight concrete riser over the septic tank to simplify access.
- Have the solids pumped out of the septic tank every 3 to 5 years.
- Maintain adequate vegetative cover over the drainfield.
- Keep surface waters away from the tank and drainfield – gutter downspouts for rain fall should be directed away from the septic tank and drainfield.
- Keep automobiles and heavy equipment off the system.
- Do not plan any building additions, pools, driveways, or other construction work near the existing septic system and/or the drainfield expansion area.