

Sonoma County to seek half-year extension on controversial septic system changes

J.D. MORRIS THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | May 22, 2018

Sonoma County officials will ask state regulators for more time to craft new rules governing the estimated 45,000-plus septic systems in the county's unincorporated areas after facing resistance from rural residents who feared the changes could force them to undertake costly and unnecessary upgrades.

The Board of Supervisors decided Tuesday to seek a six-month extension so county leaders can gather more community input and address concerns raised by homeowners, many of them from along the Russian River and on Fitch Mountain outside Healdsburg.

Supervisor Lynda Hopkins embraced the idea of an extension, expressing sympathy toward some of the criticisms raised by residents in her west county district. Hopkins advocated for more flexibility in the standards, which as proposed could require more expensive evaluations of replacement septic projects, among other changes intended to prevent wastewater systems from contaminating local watersheds.

Septic replacements can cost as much as about \$80,000, though they are often much less than that, according to county officials.

"If it's adequately functioning and there is evidence it is adequately functioning, I'm not sure why we have to replace it with the latest and greatest \$80,000 technology," Hopkins said. "I don't need a smartphone to make a phone call. A Buick will get you from Point A to Point B as well as a Cadillac."

County staff members will move quickly to prepare a draft extension request and then grant further consideration to some of the "very well-defined issues" raised by supervisors and members of the public, including flexibility in the standards and cost, said Tennis Wick, the director of the county's permit and planning department.

It's not clear when the State Water Resources Control Board might make a decision about the county's extension request once it's filed, but Wick said in an interview he has "really good confidence" the board will grant its blessing.

"We have one of the best programs in the state. We're only seeking to improve it," he said. "I would hope that we'll be granted the time to complete that process."

California lawmakers passed legislation 18 years ago directing the state water board to adopt statewide permitting and operation standards for septic systems, which didn't happen until 2012.

Sonoma County supervisors then in 2016 agreed to move forward with creating a more customized set of local standards, given the region's diverse geography and soil types.

Of particular concern to residents in the proposed new wastewater rules are heightened standards for what the county previously deemed a "voluntary repair," which usually meant the replacement of an entire leach line, staff members said. Guided by the state's policy changes, county staff recommended treating those as replacement septic systems, and also decided residents would need to have those projects reviewed by a professional engineer or registered environmental health specialist instead of a licensed contractor, as currently allowed.

Another issue has been the county's longtime practice of requiring septic system upgrades after certain levels of home expansions. Some homeowners voiced concerns the new requirements could prove unworkable on smaller or more geographically complicated lots, though county staff members say they will only require upgrades on building permit requests that exceed the county's thresholds — or if officials verify a complaint about a failed septic system.