

Q & A Sewer

Why is the City considering ordinances related to expanding the public sewer service?

Answer: In the last three years, the area has experienced a series of storms, Joaquin, Matthew and Irma. These storms caused significant flooded conditions throughout the island. Due to septic tank malfunctions, which release raw sewage into the environment, there have been concerns about the possibility of fecal coliform contamination to the environment.

In January 2016, the Public Works Committee of City Council adopted a goal of providing public sewer to every property on the Isle of Palms and tasked the Planning Commission with developing strategies to achieve this goal.

While the Planning Commission saw many advantages to expanding the public sewer system and eliminating septic systems on the island, the hurdles of financing and a negative public perception in providing public sewer to every property on the Isle of Palms were thought to be too great to recommend such a program now.

The provisions of the recommended ordinances intend to promote small, incremental expansions of the system when major private investments occur such as, building a new house, subdividing land or selling a property.

Why is the City considering an Ordinance that would require residences within a 150' of public sewer to be connected to the public sewer system?

Answer: This requirement is a means to promote small, incremental expansions of the public sewer system when a major investment is planned that will already include a major expense to address wastewater.

How much will it cost if my property is within 150' of the public sewer, I expand or re-build and, therefore, I am required to connect the structure's plumbing to the public sewer?

Answer: The cost will vary depending on the length of the pipe; however, if remodeling or building, often these types of expenses are included in the overall budget and/or financing. By way of example, a recent extension of the public sewer system around Merritt Boulevard cost \$98,000 to make sewer available to six properties.

How long has the City been considering the change to require that connection to the public sewer be made if a structure is within 150' of the public sewer system?

Answer: Recent efforts began in 2017; however, a study to sewer the entire island was complete as far back as 1990 and, in 1999, the City attempted ordinance changes through a different approach from what is being proposed now. Therefore, the City has long recognized the need and benefits of expanding the public sewer system. Recent flooding events catapulted the study to a high priority.

Q & A Sewer Page Two

Why is the City considering an Ordinance that would reduce the size of homes and reduce the impervious surfaces for homes tied into a septic system?

Answer: The reduction in house size and impervious surfaces are a means to ensure there is adequate pervious surface for a septic tank drain field to function and to ensure homes are not constructed at a square footage whose occupancy could promote septic tank failure.

Why is the City considering an Ordinance that would require houses that have a sewer line in front of them to tie in when they sell?

Answer: This provision was intended to promote the slow expansion of the public sewer system and reduce the number of septic systems and grinder pumps on the island.

Currently, this provision would only affect a few properties (less than five) when those properties sell. However, if other measures being adopted lead to the slow expansion of the system, it could be that this provision has more impact in the future.

How long has the City been considering the change to require that connection to the public sewer be made if a structure is sold with the public sewer system adjacent to the property?

In October 2015, the Planning Commission was tasked with researching the issue of requiring all future owners to tie into the sewer system. At the time, it was contemplated that this provision would give the Isle of Palms Water and Sewer Commission (IOPWSC) the ability to borrow money to expand the sewer system island-wide. It was discovered that this provision would not satisfy bonding agencies. Therefore, this is a much less ambitious provision aimed at the overall goal of expanding the public sewer system.

Why are ordinances like these necessary?

Answer: Currently there is no incentive to connecting plumbing into the public sewer system. There is currently nothing in the Isle of Palms Water and Sewer Commission regulations or the City Ordinances to enforce connection to the public sewer if it is available.

How much of the island is served by public sewer?

Answer: Only about one third of the island's homes are served by the public sewer system. The remaining ones are either served by individual septic tanks or grinder pumps.

Why are these ordinances being considered now?

Answer: With the predicted rise of flood waters, the likelihood of more frequent flooding and septic tank malfunctions releasing harmful bacteria into homes, yards and ditches is real. This has been proven with the three recent storms. Fecal coliform, which leaches into the ditch system and then into the waterways, is bacteria that is potentially harmful both to humans and to the marine life. After rain and/or flood events, the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC) may close shellfish beds to harvesting. This occurs when there are high coliform bacteria in the water, rendering shellfish unfit for consumption.

Q & A Sewer Page Three

Which is a superior means of wastewater treatment, sewer, septic tanks or grinder pumps?

Answer: All three of these methods are an acceptable means of the treatment of wastewater. However, septic tanks have specific concerns. They may not be maintained properly, may be leaching into the drainage system, may be undersized for a structure that has been renovated or re-constructed and could back up or bubble up in flood conditions. Grinder pumps require continued maintenance and, with proliferation, can become unsightly. Public wastewater treatment systems are capable of malfunction also; however, they are highly regulated, by SCDHEC and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and levels of effluent being treated and bacteria being produced are monitored daily.

What are fecal coliforms?

Answer: Coliforms are bacteria that are present in the digestive tracts of animals, including humans, and are found in their waste. Coliforms are part of the normal intestinal flora of humans and animals and, as such, perform a good function in our biology. However, there can be harmful bacteria and viruses present which can be spread by contaminated water.

What types of illness might occur if exposed to quantities of fecal matter:

Answer: Diarrheal illnesses from bacterial and viruses, types of hepatitis, other viral infections, and even parasitic infections.

I have a septic system. How will these ordinances affect me?

Answer: These ordinances will not affect you unless: your home is within 150' of a sewer line and you construct a new home or substantially improve your existing home; you have a gravity operated public sewer line (not a grinder pump line) in front of your property and you sell (the buyer would be required to tie the residential plumbing into the system); or you subdivide your property.

I have an undeveloped lot. How will this ordinance affect my property when it is developed?

Answer: If you decide to build on your lot and public sewer is within 150' of your property, the new structure will be required to be connected to the public sewer system as opposed to treating the wastewater with a septic system or grinder pump.