

# GET PUMPED! LONG ISLAND

## Septic System Owner's Guide: Fact Sheet #4



### MAINTENANCE AND INSPECTION

Maintaining your home wastewater system is much like maintaining your car: making a relatively small effort on a regular basis can save you from major inconvenience and cost, and extend the life of your vehicle. The same is true of home wastewater systems: the better you take care of your system, the better it will function, saving you time and money, keeping your family healthy, enhancing your home's value, and protecting the environment. Though maintenance of your wastewater system may not seem like a high priority, lack of maintenance is the most common cause of costly repair and/or replacement. The cost of having a home wastewater system pumped is generally \$300 to \$700, while replacing the system can range from \$5,000 to \$15,000 or more.

#### What to expect when your system is inspected and pumped

Inspection and pumping are two vital parts of home wastewater system maintenance. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends having your system inspected every three to five years and pumped as necessary. As of April 2016 there is no accepted standard in Nassau and Suffolk counties for what constitutes an inspection. Beginning June 2016, however, Suffolk County is requiring specialized septic inspector training and certification in order to be a licensed septic professional to pump-out and inspect home wastewater systems. We recommend that you select a septic inspector who has received this training and certification.



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For more information please visit: [www.GetPumpedLI.org](http://www.GetPumpedLI.org)

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Generally, home wastewater system inspections should include:

1. Household survey (i.e., age, size, and type of system, maintenance records, # residents, # bathrooms, etc.)
2. Locating all components of the system (i.e., cesspool/septic tank and leaching pits if present)
3. Uncovering and opening access ports to the septic tank, cesspool and leaching pits.
4. Measuring sludge and scum levels
5. Inspecting the inlet and access “T’s” and/or baffles
6. Checking for signs of plumbing backup
7. Pumping the tank
8. Identifying any leaks
9. Examining the contents of the system for problem items (such as “flushable wipes”)

Thorough septic inspectors will take the time to check all components of the system, starting with running water into the home wastewater system from household plumbing, physically looking into the tank to ensure its water-tightness, and measuring the levels of scum and sludge. Some septic inspectors may also locate and examine the distribution box (if present) to ensure each leaching pit is receiving the same amount of effluent and draining properly. The septic professional should also inspect the leaching area for sogginess or wastewater at the surface, which can indicate a clogged leaching pit, improper drainage, excessive water use, or a leak in the system. During the inspection, the septic professional should also provide you with a report indicating if any repairs were performed, the levels of sludge and scum as well as the condition of all components.

### **Hiring a Home Wastewater System Professional**

When calling different businesses, there are a few basic questions to ask of septic professionals:

*How long have they been in business?*

*Do they warranty their work?*

*Have their septic inspectors been certified under the 2016 or later Suffolk County regulations? Note – ask this even if you live in Nassau as many companies work in both counties.*

*Are they willing to provide references?*

Are references recent? In speaking with the reference ask if the septic professional was professional, clean, thorough, and did not try to sell unnecessary services. How long did the inspection take? Did they stand by their work? Would you use them again?

## Other questions you should ask:

*Do they provide full service – inspection and pumping?*

The company should have a pump truck so they can pump your system if necessary.

**Warning!** Septic professionals will often insist on pumping the system since it is already open for the inspection. In most cases, especially if this is your first inspection, this is a good idea and necessary for a complete inspection. This initial inspection sets the baseline for your system. Following your second inspection, a good technician should be able to recommend an inspection and pumping schedule which may be more frequent or less frequent depending on the system and your usage. Knowing the inspection and pumping schedule that is right for your system will save you money.

*What does an inspection typically entail?*

**Warning!** While there are standards in other parts of the country, until recently there has been no standard of inspection on Long Island – Suffolk County began requiring specialized training in June 2016. Inspections vary widely from a quick visual inspection to use of specialized tools such as a “Sludge Judge” to measure the sludge and scum layers, and videotaping. Be sure to get details of the inspection your septic professional proposes to perform, in writing if possible.

*How much does an inspection cost?*

A typical inspection (without pumping) including locating all system components, opening all access ports, measuring the sludge and scum layer, inspecting inlets and outlets shaped like “t’s”, checking for potential back-ups, identifying any leaks and providing a written report will take 1-2 hours and will/should cost between \$200 - \$300.

*What is the cost of pumping?*

Just like home oil professionals, septic professionals are often unable to provide the cost of pumping as they often charge by the gallon (with a minimum for the call), so they won’t know exactly how much it will cost until your system is pumped. Asking a price per gallon is reasonable as is documenting how many gallons were pumped from your system.

*Does pumping include the cost of chemicals such as acid to open clogged soils?*

**Warning sign!** Acid or other harsh chemicals should **not** be used in your system. These can kill the beneficial bacteria and be harmful to the environment.

*Do they provide starter chemicals to reactivate the system?*

**Warning sign!** The answer should be no! There are enough bacteria remaining in the tank and wastewater to ensure proper function.

## Inspection and Pumping Dos and Don'ts

- DO** think of your **home** wastewater system as an investment—in your home's value, your family's health, and the well-being of your local environment.
- DO** have your system pumped and inspected every three to five years - or on a schedule recommended by a certified septic inspector. Frequency of pumping is a function of the capacity and the use of each individual system.
- DO** use a certified professional for all inspections and pumping.
- DO** be present when your system is inspected and ask questions of the septic inspector.
- DO** keep a record of all inspections, pumping, repairs, reports, etc. for future reference.
- DON'T** ignore your system! It is better to address any problems immediately. Delaying will only cost you more in the long run.
- DON'T** use commercial septic tank additives, cleaners, feeders, starters, etc. as a substitute for regular system maintenance. **At best, these are un-needed. At worst, these additives can have a negative effect on the system's function, can contaminate our local waterways, and end up costing more in the long run.**
- DON'T** attempt to inspect and/or pump the system yourself. This can be dangerous and is illegal.
- DON'T** add a starter to the tank after having it pumped. There are enough bacteria remaining in the tank and in wastewater to ensure proper function.

### Don't forget!

- An unusable septic system or one in poor condition can lower your property value and could even be a legal liability if you sell your home.
- Frequency of pumping is affected by the size or capacity of the tank, the amount of wastewater entering the tank, and the volume of solids in the wastewater.
- Commercial additives may actually end up costing you more money because many additives break up the sludge and scum layers, causing them to flow out of the tank and clog the leaching pit.
- The pumping process should remove all scum, sludge, and liquid from the tank. It also requires flushing and back-flushing liquid contents to ensure no floating scum is left in the tank to plug the outlet or enter the leaching pool or drainfield.
- The tank should be pumped through the manhole rather than the inspection ports, which could damage the baffles in the tank and result in wastewater flowing directly into the leaching pit without allowing solids to settle out.



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