

Does Your Septic System Meet State Standards?

If you're planning to renovate all or part of your home or add on living space to your existing home, you should be aware that the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) regulations may require that your septic system be altered or upgraded. The RIDEM septic system regulations or "code", formally known as the "Rules and Regulations Establishing Minimum Standards for Location, Design, Construction and Maintenance of Individual Sewage Disposal Systems" (ISDS), apply not only to the design of new septic systems, but also to the on-going use and operation of all existing septic systems. The purpose of this guide is to provide homeowners with general information on these rules and how they may impact upon their proposed home improvement project.

Why Isn't My Septic System OK the Way It Is?

- Prior to the late 1960's, no standardized code existed in Rhode Island for the design of septic systems. Most systems in use today predate the regulatory program. Many systems consist of cesspools which do not properly provide for degradation or removal of contaminants in sewage. Other systems may be "repaired systems" which often do not meet the standards or offer the reliability provided under the current code. Consequently, these systems present potential risks to public health and the environment.
- However, it is not RIDEM's policy to compel all homeowners to upgrade their septic systems immediately. Generally, homeowners are allowed to use their existing septic systems provided they have not failed. A more opportune time to consider upgrading one's septic system is when a major new investment in the home or property is planned. The ISDS code has been carefully developed to require an upgrade based on the scope of improvement planned, the type of sewage disposal system in use, and its age. For example, because cesspools present the greatest risks to public health and environmental resources, a septic system upgrade is appropriate when the level of improvement exceeds 25% of the house's replacement value.
- In other cases, the septic system may meet current standards, but won't be large enough to handle flow resulting from increased occupancy. Increased occupancy generally is associated with an increase in the number of bedrooms. Therefore, if you plan to add a bedroom, it is likely that you will

need to expand your leaching field and possibly the septic tank size in order to ensure the septic system will work properly.

System Suitability Determination Process

- To find out if your septic system is suitable for your proposed home improvement, you must submit a System Suitability Determination (SSD) application to RIDEM. Please note, you are generally not required to submit an SSD if your improvement does not require a building permit.
- The SSD application asks several questions regarding the scope of the improvements proposed and details about the existing septic system. The application is a multi part form and is available by calling the Permitting Section at RIDEM (222-6820). Your local Building Official also may have these forms available. The forms are intended for completion by the homeowner, but some may wish to seek the assistance of a person knowledgeable on sewage disposal matters, such as the professional who designed the ISDS system or the contractor who services it. The completed application must be submitted, along with the proper fee, directly to RIDEM or mailed to the Office of Management Services, Room 340, 235 Promenade Street, Providence RI 02908.
- RIDEM will review the application and visit your property. Conditions bearing on the suitability of the septic system will be observed and noted. A decision will be given in writing indicating that the system is either acceptable for the proposed improvement or unacceptable.
- In general, you will be required to upgrade your septic system if your home improvement project meets one or more of the following criteria:
 - improvement will add one or more bedrooms,
 - scope of improvement will affect 50% or more of the floor space, or
 - cost of improvement will be greater than 25% of the replacement value of the home and the existing sewage disposal system is a cesspool.
- If your system is determined to be acceptable, you have satisfied the RIDEM requirement under this process. If deemed unacceptable, further work is usually required. This may include hiring a professional to evaluate your existing system more thoroughly or to design a new system. A copy of RIDEM's decision also will be given to the local building official.

Who is Responsible for Submitting an SSD?

You, the homeowner, are! Like all other laws and regulations which affect you, it is your responsibility to be aware of these requirements and plan accordingly. Notwithstanding, your local building official may, upon review of your building permit application, require that you present a RIDEM approved System Suitability Determination or Individual Sewage Disposal System design application prior to issuing a building permit.

Prospective buyers are urged to request an SSD for additions or renovations which are essential to their plans before making final decisions.

Can I Forego the SSD Process and Instead Apply Directly for an Alteration Permit?

Yes. If after reviewing this pamphlet or reading the RIDEM septic system rules you believe you will need a new system before undertaking a property improvement, you can apply directly for an alteration permit and forego the SSD process. The rules require that you retain a professional engineer or land surveyor to design the system. Names are often listed in the yellow pages of the telephone directory. These "designers" should be able to answer specific questions about design and installation issues.

Is It a Bedroom or Is It a Study?

Septic systems are sized and designed based on the number of bedrooms to be served. Bathrooms and fixtures are not normally counted in the design process. RIDEM rules define a bedroom to be a room greater than 100 square feet in area which may be used as a private sleeping area and which has at least one window and one interior doorway. The State Building Code defines a bedroom somewhat differently and has other requirements for housing based on number of occupants. Many rooms intended to be used as study rooms or offices meet both definitions. Generally, RIDEM will consider such a room to be a bedroom if it is likely to be used as one by the present or future owner.

RIDEM is most concerned with older dwellings of one or two bedrooms being renovated into two or three bedroom homes. Renovations involving the conversion of seasonally-used homes to year-round use are also a concern. Often the septic systems of such homes are substandard according to current regulations. On the other hand, if a home has a more modern septic systems which is already of substantial size, and the addition of a family room or study is planned, RIDEM will generally not require an expansion of the ISDS system under the increased flow criterion provided the septic system is otherwise up to code.

Alterations versus New Building Requirements

The SSD rendered by RIDEM may indicate that some level of ISDS alteration or improvement is needed. Certain projects or circumstances may warrant that an ISDS be

upgraded to meet "new construction" standards. Usually, this occurs when proposing to add more than one bedroom to the structure. If the property cannot support a system of the size and design required by current standards, you may be prohibited from expanding your dwelling to that extent.

In most other instances, the required septic system upgrade will be classified as an "alteration" of the ISDS system. This most frequently occurs when the house is currently served by a cesspool. The standards to be met are similar to those of new construction except that relief will often be granted due to property or lot size constraints.

Word of Caution on Repaired Systems

Even though you may have recently repaired your ISDS system, it may not be certain that it meets current code. Repairs are made for a variety of reasons and are often done under emergency conditions where RIDEM does not insist on full compliance with procedures for new installations. Accordingly, additional testing by a registered professional engineer or land surveyor may be needed to ascertain compliance.

If you are planning to improve your home in the next year or so and your ISDS has failed, you may wish to upgrade your system to current standards rather than simply repair it. This may save you time and expense later on.

How Might I Know that I Have a Failed System?

It usually isn't hard to tell. A problem-free septic system should work all year long, not cause a sewage back-up in the house, not cause a noticeable odor outside, and not stain the lawn. If your backyard gets wet, soggy and smelly in the spring, you may have a failed system. If you suddenly find it necessary to pump out the septic tank frequently, say every three to six months, you probably have a failed system. Good preventative maintenance includes pumping your septic tank once every three to five years to remove accumulated solids and grease. If you have ignored this regular maintenance and the system is now telling you it needs to be pumped, it's too late — you have a failed system that requires repair.

Should you have any questions regarding this pamphlet or other procedures under the State septic system rules and regulations, please call the RIDEM Office of Water Resources, Permitting Section at 222-6820.

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Permitting Section - Office of Water Resources
Department of Environmental Management
235 Promenade Street
Providence, RI 02908

A Guide for Homeowners Planning Home Improvements