

Vashon-Maury Island Beachcomber – May 30, 2007

By LESLIE BROWN Staff Writer

King County officials are about to take on what many have long considered the near-impossible: a clean-up of the failing septic systems along the western shore of outer Quartermaster Harbor. Their goal is to get the beaches clean enough that they can be reopened to commercial shellfish harvest, particularly geoducks, which are commanding record-high prices in Asia. They have another goal, as well: To find a way to make this happen that is neither acrimonious nor confrontational. In other words, they don't want a repeat of what one Islander called "the Bunker Trail situation."

"I can get real jazzed about this," said Larry Fay, the section manager for community environmental health in the county's Department of Health and the lead official in the effort. "When we're done, if we've shifted the thinking and the dynamics and folks feel there are opportunities for them and ... we can get the area open to harvest — to me, that's the success we're looking for."

Islanders active on groundwater issues say they're encouraged by the county's new approach. Quartermaster, an ecologically rich part of the Sound, has long had a reputation for soiled beaches — due in part to the raw sewage that comes straight out of some the old, beach-front cabins clustered along its shore.

But they also say that Fay and his colleagues have a daunting task ahead of them — one complicated by archaic rules, cumbersome bureaucracies and a long history of distrust Islanders harbor towards the county.

"It's a whole new approach by the Department of Health. They've never done anything like this. And it's going to be a big challenge," said Steve Graham, who chairs the Septic Solutions Committee for the Vashon-Maury Island Community Council.

"I hope this will work," he continued. "If it works well, it might lead to a much safer and cleaner Vashon Island. If it doesn't work well, it might lead to a lot of court battles and screaming and shouting."

"The history is very negative," added Donna Klemka, who chairs the community council's Groundwater Committee. "Larry is working very hard in the health department to bring change." The county's efforts at Quartermaster Harbor are driven by a new state law that requires each of the 13 counties bordering Puget Sound to identify and clean up one marine recovery area or MRA — a place that is currently closed to shellfish harvest due to water pollution. Once the MRA is identified, the law states, counties are to come up with a plan and begin taking measurable steps to address the pollution within five years — with a goal of getting the area clean enough that the state Department of Health can certify it as open for shellfish harvest. In King County, officials decided to focus on Quartermaster Harbor because of its ecological importance as well as its significance to the Puyallup Indian Tribe, which has a right to 50 percent of the commercial shellfish harvest under court decisions that identified the tribe's traditional harvest grounds.

"They're concerned that they're unable to exercise the treaty rights they have because of the water quality problems," Fay said. "And they've said to us, 'What are you going to do about it.' And they're right. Yes, it's been an incentive. It's caused us to say, 'You know what? We really have to figure out how to get us to a place where we can all enjoy those resources again.'" But Fay said they decided to focus on the stretch of Quartermaster that begins at Governors Row in Burton and extends to Neill Point at the southern tip of Vashon because of another critical factor: "It's technically challenging to me, but it looks doable," he said. All told, about 110 homes are located on that stretch of shoreline, many of them in small communities. By working thoughtfully with one community at a time, Fay said, he hopes to find some creative solutions, figure out what works, allay fears and build some momentum. "I see this as less as a technical and regulatory issue and more as a social and people one," he said.

"If I can get the staffing to do the community work and really engage folks, I think we can make some headway," Fay added. "We want to focus on creativity, innovation and cooperation." Quartermaster Harbor has long stirred concern among conservationists and groundwater activists. An area known for its eelgrass beds and bird habitat, this long finger of water that divides Vashon from Maury has also suffered over the years. First, the filling in of Portage nearly 100 years ago turned Quartermaster into a bay, ending the flushing action that used to help keep the water clean. More troubling, conservationists say, are the number of failing or even non-existent septic systems dumping raw sewage onto the beach.

Islanders who live along Quartermaster say they have little doubt of the problem. Some note the detectable odor. Some say they've actually found human waste on the beach. Others say their own non-existent or failing system is proof.

"I know for a fact that systems are failing," said Stan Merrell, who lives just south of Governors Row. "Ours was one of them."

Merrell, who has held what he calls "septic socials" in his neighborhood to try to encourage others to consider improving their septic system, said he believes homeowners have an obligation to do what's right for the beaches in front of their homes and those of their neighbors. "No one asked us to put in a new system, but how do you live with yourself if you don't?" he asked.

Graham, who has worked on Island-related septic issues for the last four years, agrees that on an Island like Vashon, where an environmental ethic runs strong, a failing septic seems inexcusable. "We're not Bangladesh," he said. "We should be able to clean up our sewage." But Merrell, Graham and others say they fully understand why many Islanders who lived along Quartermaster haven't stepped forward on their own to try to redress the situation. The county, they said, has proven remarkably difficult to work with on septic issues, essentially penalizing those who come forward and acknowledge they have a problem. The rules that the county officials follow, they said, are rigid and outdated, forcing homeowners to use designs that either can't work on their small piece of land or that are extremely expensive.

"If you go to the county and say, 'I've got this big problem,' they beat you up. If you're a scoff

law, nothing happens," said Graham. "It pays to not do anything, and you're punished for trying to do something."

Michael Laurie, a Vashon-based water efficiency consultant, said he's gone to the county to talk to officials about lower-cost options — such as composting toilets and gray-water systems — only to find that they know little about these newer technologies; instead, he said, they seem open only to a conventional septic system, which can easily cost a homeowner \$40,000 or more. At the May 21st meeting of the Vashon-Maury Island Community Council, where Fay discussed the new MRA, one Islander stood up, Laurie said, and identified himself as a homeowner within the MRA. "In response to a question, he said the reason no one else from the MRA was there is that they're all very scared," Laurie said. "He said, 'We know we have substandard systems, and we're afraid if we step forward, we'll have to spend a lot of money.'"

These aren't idle fears, Laurie and others add. The last time King County stepped in and ordered beach-front communities to address their failing septic systems, homeowners along Bunker Trail and in Buelah Park had to pay \$40,000 to \$50,000 to meet the county's exacting standards. Some, unable to pay, had to sell their homes.

Fay said he fully understands these concerns, having heard stories about the Bunker Trail and Buelah Park situation from countless Islanders. This time around, he adds, he's determined to see it work differently.

The county has \$550,000 in low-interest and grant funding to help Islanders pay for new or upgraded systems, he said. More importantly, he added, he hopes to use new technologies and innovations to help homeowners find creative and affordable solutions. Some homeowners, for instance, might simply need to repair or replace their septic systems. Others might want to explore gray-water systems, in which the demands on a septic system are significantly reduced by the recycling of dish, shower, sink and laundry water. And in areas where there's not enough land for a septic system, the county might work with homeowners to develop what Fay called "fairly sophisticated systems" that are monitored by professionals remotely.

But none of this will be easy, Fay acknowledged. And while he and many Islanders say they see this as an auspicious opportunity, they also note that the challenges are many.

"Larry's a smart guy," Graham said. "But he's got a tough bureaucracy and a tough funding situation. ... They need to build community motivation. And they have to avoid building a popular uprising. ... I think it's the biggest thing on Vashon they've attempted "