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OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND:
AN EXPLORATION OF WASTEWATER ISSUES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS IN AND
OUT OF MONTANA

By

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Religious Studies, History, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana, 2017

Professional Paper

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Major
*Environmental and Natural
Resources Journalism*

Out of sight, out of mind: An exploration of wastewater issues and possible solutions in and out of Montana

Chairperson: Dennis Swibold

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This is a master's project, featuring three stories, linked in theme. The first starts with a nationally scoped story about septic systems in resort towns and what happens when too many people want to visit areas like Cape Cod, the Florida Keys or, more locally, Seeley Lake, and overwhelm waste disposal methods. Often in these areas that are more remote, septic systems are the norm. Septic systems can be effective methods of waste disposal, but they must be maintained, which is not always the case. When nutrients from septic systems leach into groundwater, they can make their way into surface water as algal blooms, a nuisance that can sometimes be toxic and commonly keeps people out of the water, a problem for resort communities that rely on water recreation.

Secondly, the project looks at a regional solution to another waste problem. A septage facility was proposed in Flathead County, Montana to address an issue septic pumpers and haulers were having – they didn't have anywhere to dump their loads. As the prices of land continue to rise with a population influx and mirrored real estate prices in Montana, the land that pumpers and haulers typically used for land application is running low. Land application, or the act of disposing human waste as fertilizer onto a farm plot, has been practiced in one form or another for generations.

Lastly, this project looks at a more political solution to growth, infrastructure and waste. Montana Governor Greg Gianforte released his budget before the 2023 legislature and earmarked \$200 million for water and sewer infrastructure upgrades, with a goal of that money going towards larger municipalities to facilitate expansion. Local economists in Bozeman, Montana saw this money as a way of supporting growth while eventually lowering the cost of housing, something the city of Bozeman continues to deal with as a result of more people and wealth coming to the city.

Professional Project

Part One

Published in [The New Republic](#) under the title: [Lakeside vacation towns have a controversial poop problem](#)

Cheri Thompson was working at the flower shop when I called to talk about Seeley Lake's sewer situation. "I call it The Conflict," Thompson said. Seeley Lake, a rural blue-collar community in northwest Montana with just over 1,500 inhabitants, has been split in two by a seemingly pedestrian plumbing dispute that's become a microcosm of a nationwide water crisis.

You wouldn't be able to tell as an outsider. In the summer, the walk-up ice cream store off the highway sells strawberry soft serve, and convenience stores double as coffee shops and gift stores offering huckleberry jam and books about Montana. The population swells with tourists who rent Airbnbs or come to their summer cabins to camp, fish, and go boating and swimming.

What sustains the community in the summer is the lake, which is also the town's main drinking-water source. This is where the conflict comes in.

Studies have documented rising nitrogen levels in the groundwater that leads to the lake, as well as fecal coliform in test wells, which is generally indicative of failing septic systems. All of the homes in Seeley Lake use septic systems. Because of groundwater contamination, any new developments, housing or commercial, that would further impact the groundwater have been halted. Any new septic systems installed would have to be higher quality, newer models, which could be costly.

Last summer, someone reported a harmful algal bloom known to be toxic to people, fish, birds, and other animals on the lake to Montana's Department of Environmental Quality's monitoring website, one sign of possible nutrient imbalances, likely from septic systems starting to fail.

The sewer board, supported by the Missoula City-County Public Health Department, decided in 2016 that the town was in need of a new and expensive sewer system. But not everyone in town was thrilled with the plan. The extra cost to locals in taxes would be about \$150 a month; in a town where the average salary is just over \$40,000 a year, many cannot afford that. Plus, only 650 people—those drawn into the sewer district—would be responsible for the costs. That was one of Thompson's biggest concerns.

"The town was in two camps," Don Larson, who has lived in Seeley Lake for over 40 years, told me. "It really divided the community." He saw one camp for the sewer because it could help the town grow, while the other was against it because of the cost and a desire for more data. Larson landed in the latter camp.

Now aged 75, and \$100,000 poorer after suing Seeley's sewer board to try to delay the vote on financing the sewer system, Larson is selling his house. "Seeley's kind of floundering right now, and I'm burnt out," he said.

Seeley Lake's crisis is just one example of a national problem. Communities across the United States that thrive on water are experiencing similar water-quality issues linked to an overload of nutrients. A sewer is often encouraged as the best and easiest solution, but in tourism-oriented communities, the people who remain after the days get shorter and kids go back to school are the people who pay for the system.

Other solutions do exist, but they range from the expensive to the weird.

As a kid, Brian Baumgaertel would spend summers in Cape Cod. The region never left him, and 15 years ago he decided to make it his home.

"It's a pretty unique and special location," he told me. "There's a lot of places that are along the seaside, but not a lot of places that are Cape Cod."

Baumgaertel said he doesn't have the perspective of the old-time Cape Codders who have watched the water degrade, but people talk. "You hear stories of somebody who will say, 'When I was a kid, we came here in the '60s, and we'd take our boat out and there would be no algae,'" Baumgaertel said. "And now we go out in the bay and it's green."

Baumgaertel, the director of the Massachusetts Alternative Septic System Test Center, said scientists posited that nutrient contamination in the Cape was coming from septic systems as early as the late 1990s, but it took a long time for people to get moving in the right direction. As with climate change, Baumgaertel said it's difficult to get people to think about existential threats as reality.

Cape Cod had the right type of soils for septic systems to work, said Andrew Gottlieb, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod. The reason they stopped working, Gottlieb added, was because there has been more development in Cape Cod since the 1980s than in the cumulative time that had passed since the pilgrims arrived. It became such an obvious problem that even the biggest skeptics couldn't ignore it.

In addition to the green bays and ponds, the nutrient loading destroyed all the eelgrass, habitat for the Cape's signature shellfish and scallops. Large floating algal mats appeared on top of the water, and the floor went from sand to muck.

Lakes became ideal habitat for cyanobacteria blooms, which can produce powerful poisons. Public health concerns resulted in closures of beaches and towns on the Cape. "Everything that could have gone wrong has," Gottlieb said.

Gottlieb has learned that money is almost always the fundamental roadblock on these issues. So figuring out who actually has the requisite funds, and taxing accordingly, is the key to progress.

“People can question the science. They question the modeling, they question the engineering, and at the end of the day they’re just denying spending money. All of those things have an element of kicking the can down the road financially,” he said.

One solution was the adoption of an overnight tourist tax on the Cape that adds 2.75 percent to a home rental or hotel bill, which goes directly to a municipal wastewater fund; since 2018, \$97 million in project funds have been provided to towns in support of water-quality projects. The tourist economy is important, Gottlieb said, but with a four-week summer peak of infrastructure use, it brings with it costs the year-round population cannot afford to address.

Cape Cod, like many resort communities, has a balance of people with McMansions and those who work service industry jobs. “Inland, it’s normal people who work at Cooke’s Seafood. They do the cleaning in the Airbnb houses or in the motels. They’re lifeguards. They’re the [Department of Public Works] workers just trying to keep the road in decent shape. There are a lot of people who are struggling to live here,” Baumgaertel said, adding that putting the cost of a wastewater treatment plant on their backs is a big ask.

The soil in the Florida Keys, unlike that in Cape Cod, was bad for septic systems from the start.

The limestone down there is easily dissolvable. “If you’re putting your waste in the ground it’s not great, because there’s a high probability that it can move pretty quickly,” said Erin Lipp, professor of environmental health science at the University of Georgia. Development then made the problem even worse, she added: Because everyone who lives in the Keys wants to be on the water, canals were dug to create more water access, reducing the amount of soil that is supposed to process waste.

Lipp vacationed in the Keys a couple of times when she was young but only started getting interested in septic system issues when she started her master’s work on water quality in the Keys. Her studies tried to assess how fast human bacteria from septic systems could move out into the coastal waters.

Lipp and her fellow researchers flushed benign viruses and dyes down toilets and set up underground and offshore monitoring stations to watch the dyes move from the plumbing to the water.

“It was pretty striking,” Lipp says. The virus showed up in some canals in six hours. Some of the viruses and dyes made it all the way to the coral reef eight miles from shore and attached to the corals. Luckily, Lipp said, the human viruses didn’t really affect the reefs. The coral just sloughed them off.

As studies like these came out, a 20-year period of funding was kicked off for adding sewer systems to the Florida Keys. While this was spread out over a long time period, “it was a lot of money,” Lipp said. The last sewer system was finished in 2017. Despite the lag time and fairly large assessments on homeowners, the Keys have become a rare success story for updating sewage systems.

These aren't the only possible solutions to wastewater problems, which can spark remarkably creative feats of environmental engineering. The Swedish island of Gotland, for instance, has started using unique portable toilets for summer events, with the urine collected from them processed into a dry fertilizer that can be used to grow barley that is then brewed into beer.

But by and large, wastewater solutions are hard to implement because the problem is often invisible. It involves pipes and tanks underneath the surface that people want to think about maybe once and never again. Anna-Lisa Castle, policy director for clean water and equity at the Alliance for the Great Lakes, said it's hard to build political will around an invisible issue.

President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which passed last year, threw a program designed to respond to communities' wastewater issues into the spotlight—the State Revolving Fund. Created under 1987 amendments to the Clean Water Act, the SRF uses federal and state money to come up with loans for projects related to municipal wastewater facility construction; so-called nonpoint source pollution—which is how septic leachate is categorized; and decentralized wastewater systems, among other things.

“Because we have not invested in clean water infrastructure to the degree we've needed to, it becomes politically challenging at the local level to fund some of these things,” Castle said. Historic levels of funding have been added to SRF programs with the passage of the infrastructure bill, she added. With almost \$12 billion nationally earmarked for wastewater and nonpoint source pollution projects and \$5 billion for small or disadvantaged communities to address water contamination, the infrastructure package might bring relief to The Conflict in Seeley.

When I spoke to Cheri Thompson in Seeley Lake, she had just finished mowing and raking a trail for a triathlon the town was hosting to benefit a nondenominational church group that works with disenfranchised kids. In spite of the dispute that animated the town, the community still shows a remarkable amount of solidarity.

She told me the Seeley Lake Sewer Board, of which she is a member, has decided to put extra effort into testing, trying to figure out where the water-quality problem is coming from. From there, the plan is to hire an engineering company to tell the board where best to drill new test wells and guide it toward figuring out a solution to the lake contamination problem.

I asked her how she would solve Seeley's problem, given a magic wand. Thompson paused.

“What we really are going to find is that we are going to have multiple answers,” she said. Maybe they’ll come up with a neighborhood-based solution and some neighborhoods will install upgraded septic systems. Maybe the payment scheme will vary per neighborhood based on how much the neighborhood is contributing to the problem.

Baumgaertel, in Cape Cod, thinks the best solution is a mixed solution. But if he had a magic wand for Cape Cod, he first thought he’d sewer the whole place, with the magic wand taking the money out of consideration.

Tourist communities like the Keys, the Cape, and Seeley all have an element of magic to them. In a lot of ways, that magic relies on a façade of unknowing. As long as there’s sun and wine and water, it’s all good.

But that magic might not be maintained if the water those places rely on is green all summer long with toxic algae. And if green water leads to beach closures and a reduction in the tourists many water communities rely on, the communities will have lost their economies, their water, and their character. While wastewater issues can first show up as occasional aesthetic concerns, left untreated, the problem quickly becomes existential.

Part Two

*Published in [Montana Free Press](#) under the title: *Solving for sewage in Somers**

It’s kind of a thing for septic pumpers and haulers to have puns on their trucks. One time, Conrad Eckert had one that said “Caution: Hauling political promises.”

Eckert took over his dad’s pumping and hauling business in 2012. Eckert senior started Eckert’s Septic Services in 1969, and his son has since renamed the business Eckert’s Patriot Pumpers.

A lot has changed since Eckert took over, perhaps the worst being a lack of land available for dumping his loads of sewage. As the population in Ravalli County grows and new residents look outside of city limits to settle down, city pipes aren’t there to handle their waste.

Septic systems come with a tradeoff. Living in an area without a sewer system means people have to manage their own waste. Something that remains consistent, however, wherever you live, is that the waste has to go somewhere.

And that’s where Eckert comes in.

He drives around in his truck — bedecked with the American flag, a bald eagle and “We The People” on the side — and pumps people’s septic systems. Pumping is required about every five years to keep a septic system working properly. The solids and liquids — poop, pee, grease, scum, sludge and garbage — are referred to as septage. Septage contains high concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus that can be too much for municipal wastewater treatment systems. In many cases, that septage is spread on a farmer’s field to serve as fertilizer for pasture grass.

That practice is called “land application,” and for Montanans who aren’t connected to municipal sewer systems, it’s one of the most common ways to dispose of solid waste.

Eckert doesn’t have a land application site in Ravalli County right now. One he’s used in the past is out of commission because the owner is considering selling the land for development. He can drive septage to the Missoula municipal treatment plant, but he knows of others who end up without a legal place to dump.

“We’ve had people call us and tell us they’ve seen pumpers dumping in the [Bitterroot] river. When they get there it’s just washed down the stream,” Eckert said.

North of Ravalli County, in Flathead County, something similar is unfolding.

Both of counties have fairly large rural swathes, high levels of population growth, and influxes of people who want to live on acreage that may once have been available for dumping septage.

According to U.S. census data, Flathead County is the fastest growing micropolitan area in the country. As more people move in and the practice of land application becomes more difficult, Flathead County is trying to figure out what to do with its waste. A proposed solution — building a facility to collect septic system waste and turn it into compost — strikes some locals as a no-brainer. Others view the idea as a condemnation of their way of life.

Montana’s Department of Environmental Quality is in charge of overseeing land application sites and licensing pumpers.

DEQ Solid Waste Section Supervisor Fred Collins said not all pumpers dump their loads on fields, but land application has been a primary method of solid waste disposal because of the availability of land, the limited infrastructure required and maxed-out capacity at city wastewater treatment plants.

An approved land application site has to check quite a few boxes: It must be far from homes, surface water, groundwater, roads, drinking water supplies and slopes. Pumpers have to submit an operation and maintenance plan to DEQ indicating the equipment they plan to use, what type of crops are going to grow and the type of waste that will be applied. All those considerations limit the land that can be used for solid waste disposal and ultimately point toward areas that could also be suitable for residential development.

Collins said the Flathead Valley relies heavily on land application because the Kalispell wastewater treatment plant doesn’t accept septage. He thinks the proposed septage facility could be a good solution to a regional problem.

“In waste, generally, it’s sometimes nicer and a little bit easier to manage when it’s centralized,” Collins said.

Centralization is something that those in favor of a septage facility emphasize.

The proposed septage facility in Flathead County would consist of two parts: treatment and composting. Pumpers would bring their loads to the facility, and a system would separate solids from liquids. The system would connect to Lakeside's water treatment plant and direct the liquids there, where they would be treated and used for irrigation, a practice already in place. The solids would stay on-site and be turned into compost. The facility would include mechanisms to control odor.

Flathead County received a \$15 million federal grant, part of COVID-relief money, in 2021 for the facility's construction, and plans to buy property on Wiley Dike Road in Somers for \$1.5 million. The timeline for completion is tentative, and DEQ hasn't yet received an application for the facility.

Flathead County Commissioner Randy Brodehl said the problem of losing land to waste disposal has been ongoing for years due to population growth.

"Everyone that's developing out there, they're looking at how many lots they can get on plots," Brodehl said. "Very few people see dealing with septage as a high priority."

Pumpers, unsurprisingly, don't fall in that category.

Dustin Thornton with A1 Sanitation in Kalispell has a different take on the proposed facility. He said it would be the last place he would go.

"All the stuff they're buying for millions of dollars, I've been piecing together for years," Thornton said.

Unlike Eckert, Thornton has his own land application sites. A1 Sanitation has six septic trucks — also adorned with puns — and Thornton remembers that fleet being sufficient to serve the whole valley at one point. Potential construction of a new facility that could allow for more pumpers in the area has him worried about the health of his business.

Thornton's advantage is access to land, he said, and he sees the facility as leveling the playing field for everyone else in the business after he's invested in his own land application sites and advanced treatment methods.

"I'm all for competition ... but the government stepping in and just saying, 'Well, we're going to even it out.' it's pretty frustrating," Thornton said.

At a crowded public meeting in Kalispell on Dec. 1, local residents expressed a variety of concerns. Some spoke up about increased truck traffic and a big, ugly facility changing the character of the rural area. Others voiced worry about the nearby floodplain. Some were simply shocked to learn about land application and the use of human waste as compost.

The proposed septage facility wouldn't be the only place in Montana to reuse human waste. Mountain West Products, producer of a compost called Glacier Gold, already has two locations in northwest Montana.

Glacier Gold takes sludge from the city of Kalispell's wastewater treatment plant, combines it with sawdust or bark, dries it out and sells it in bags. Human waste, like any other fertilizer, is filled with nitrogen and phosphorus, two nutrients that help plants grow.

Joe Warner, who's worked in sales with Glacier Gold since 1995, said the forest products used to create the compost would have been disposed of in years past, but today, combined with the sludge, it contributes to a useful product.

"We're taking two problems on this planet and creating something positive," Warner said.

Anna Mahlen has used Glacier Gold before, but, after learning what's actually in it at the Dec. 1 meeting, she vowed never to use it again. Mahlen has lived just across the street from the site of the proposed facility in Somers for more than 20 years. Once the facility is built, she says, she could throw a baseball from her property and hit it.

A big sign on her fence with a "stop" symbol and a poop emoji encourages others to fight the septage facility. She worries about increased truck traffic and what the plant would do to her property values. Mahlen said she doesn't have a lot of money to leave to her kids, but she wants to leave them her home.

"It just won't be the same," she said.

Dean Robbins, another neighbor of the proposed facility, has also used Glacier Gold, and said he's not put off by human excrement. But he doesn't think this is the right place for the facility. "I'll withhold judgment about whether it's needed," he said, but he's certain the location is wrong.

County Commissioner Brodehl acknowledged that other locations in the area might be better suited to the facility, but this one was for sale. The facility also needs to be near a cooperating wastewater treatment plant like the one in Lakeside. Brodehl said treatment plants in Kalispell, Whitefish, Colombia Falls and Big Fork are already operating at capacity.

The county is scheduled to purchase the property on Jan. 13, after an environmental review and business plan are completed. Pete Melnik, Flathead County administrator, said infrastructure is one way county governments can actually address problems. They can't build apartments or houses, he said, but they can build infrastructure to support growing communities. As far as the Wiley Dike Road property goes, Melnik sees a lot of pluses: It's centrally located, the infrastructure is already there and the property is for sale.

"The elements are conspiring to put it there," Melnik said.

The Somers septage facility, with its composting capacity, would be the first of its kind in Montana, but not in the region.

The wastewater treatment plant in Coeur d'Alene has been biocomposting for more than 30 years. Instead of taking septage, it uses waste gathered from its municipal sewer system.

Bill Martin, assistant wastewater director for the city, described the material that gets added to wood chips to make the compost as “chocolate cake.” Apparently, the consistency is similar.

After the cake is combined with the woodchips, heavy metals, dangerous bacteria and odors are removed, making it safe enough to use on a vegetable garden. Martin said, that for the most part people are all for it, but he understands the concerns of those who aren't.

“My advice to them is, you know, I get it, but your flowers don't care,” Martin said.

Eckert, Ravalli County, remembers his dad at one point being in charge of seven counties in northeastern Montana. When he pumped septic tanks, it was normal for the waste to go right back onto his customers' property. People understood that was the tradeoff.

People moving into western Montana today, he added, don't have that same conception of waste. He drew up plans for a septage facility in Ravalli County 15 years ago, but no one saw the need at the time.

“You flush a toilet, it goes away and that's it and then it's gone,” Eckert said. “So, it's education. It's getting to understand that it's got to go some place.”

Part Three

Published in the [Bozeman Daily Chronicle](#) under the title: Governor's money for infrastructure supports growth

Building water and sewer projects is expensive, but a \$200 million proposal in Gov. Greg Gianforte's budget could easily support thousands of affordable housing units across Montana.

That's an estimate from Mike Veselik, economic development program manager for the city of Bozeman. Veselik said one prohibitive element that chips away at affordability is infrastructure. He brought up a general example.

Say a formerly commercial property is being turned into apartment buildings, going from maybe five or six people using the facilities to 100 apartments. Upgrading water and sewer lines to accommodate hundreds of people can cost hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars, Veselik said.

“That's where these grants and loans will be really effective,” he said.

As Montana lawmakers get ready to enter the Capitol for the 68th legislative session, they expect a budget surplus of a more than \$1 billion. Gov. Greg Gianforte has proposed \$200 million of

that to water and sewer infrastructure to support municipal growth. The details of who can get how much are still being determined, but the sentiment is that this money is meant for growing Montana cities.

There are already programs in the state to financially support more functional or basic infrastructure upgrades.

Dave Smith, executive director of the Montana Contractors Association, said when the first call went out two years ago for proposals to use federal COVID-related money, cities and counties added money to existing infrastructure projects, deciding to replace lines that might have been 100 years old because they finally had the money. The state ended up allocating \$450 million for community water and sewer projects then, he said.

Without such grants, Kelly Lynch, executive director of the Montana League of Cities and Towns, said this \$200 million is best for areas that are growing because few funding opportunities exist for increasing the capacity of or extending a sewer system.

Growing cities need money for increasing water and sewer capacity to support more people and this \$200 million provides the funds for that, Lynch said. That's money the developer won't have to spend on such systems, allowing them to pass the savings onto buyers.

"This really is just one area where there really is kind of a lack of access for funding," Lynch said.

This idea stemmed from the governor's Housing Task Force. The Task Force's priorities were focused on municipal development, expanding where the bones are already there.

Valery Stacey represented the Montana Environmental Health Association on the Housing Task Force. Stacey sees a connection between sprawling development, wastewater infrastructure and affordable housing. She said it comes down to figuring out how to fund municipal wastewater expansions without placing the cost on the developer.

Stacey said some of the development patterns seen in Montana come from the fact that it's usually cheaper to develop outside city limits. If infrastructure can be publicly funded, "(w)e might start seeing denser development in areas we want to see it instead of the sprawl," she said.

The \$200 million for water and sewer in the governor's proposed budget is also a way to address affordable housing, Stacey said. Affordable housing doesn't only take into account the cost of the house, she said, but also surrounding pieces, like energy or water and sewer costs.

"If we can find public dollars to expand municipal infrastructure, that is one of the most important tickets to building more affordable housing units," she said.

Veselik agreed.

Developers have to provide funds for upgraded infrastructure in housing proposals, said Veselik. If Bozeman had some extra money to offset those costs in exchange for encouraging the building of homes for workers, he said that could be a good use of taxpayer dollars.

“It’s going to be very measurable,” he said. “We’ll be able to see every dollar that’s invested in one of these projects.”

The finer details of this money — like who will award it, how much can be applied for and any related requirements — will be parsed out during the upcoming legislative session.

The governor’s office has said that to be eligible for funds, certain requirements will need to be met, like the intention to increase density, which could mean allowing accessory dwelling units on a lot or taller apartment complexes.

“I think every community could benefit from this,” Veselik said.