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Rye urges residents to help fix 'Stinky Creek'

RYE — Contamination in the Parsons Creek watershed, known in town as “Stinky Creek,” has been the subject of scrutiny the past several years and is again becoming a focal point of the town’s attention.

Parsons Creek, located on Route 1A in Rye across from Petey's Seafood restaurant, is often referred to as "Stinky Creek" by town residents. Photo by Rich Beauchesne/Seacoastonline

Town officials are calling for residents and property owners to support the restoration effort in part by getting their septic systems tested.

Studies of Parsons Creek began in 2008, when the state Department of Environmental Services alerted Rye that the 2.28-square-mile watershed had been categorized as an impaired water body. Since then, numerous studies were conducted and a restoration plan put into action to address the creek’s bacterial contamination. High fecal bacteria counts are of concern to many people because the mouth of the creek meets Wallis Sands Beach.

A public forum on the creek's restoration process will be held at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 13 at Rye Public Library with town officials, the NHDES and consulting firm FB Environmental Associates. The forum will provide the public with an update on past and present restoration efforts, as well as future actions. Citizens are encouraged to attend and join the conversation.

Sally Soule of the NHDES Watershed Assistance Section provided a brief history of Parsons Creek’s contamination problem. She explained that before 2008, the DES had been testing the creek’s bacteria levels until they became substantially elevated, at which point the town of Rye was alerted.

In 2011, after an extensive studying and planning phase, Rye discovered the major sources of bacterial contamination were malfunctioning septic systems and developed area stormwater runoff. Other minor sources included pet and agricultural waste. Septic system pollution has been a particularly difficult contamination source for the town to address, partly due to a lack of engagement from the community.

“These water bodies’ decline has been long and slow, so in order to bring them back it takes a lot of work from a lot of people ... you have to have local partners on board,” Soule said.

The public forum will highlight this difficulty through public outreach to promote septic system maintenance, including the location of faulty systems and the adoption of a recently developed pump-out ordinance to regulate septic systems.

Kim Reed, Rye's planning and zoning administrator, said phase one saw little support from the community. Town officials went door-to-door asking residents to fill out a septic survey designed to locate malfunctioning systems and the response rate was low, she said.

“It has been a challenge," Reed said. We "would love the homeowners to step up and take responsibility. Some (residents) don’t know what septic system they have, especially on rental properties. If these people could contact us and say, 'We have an old system, could you come inspect it?' ... We would love feedback from these residents."

Reed said Rye will evaluate up to 25 septic systems free of charge, and if they need to be replaced, the town will give the owners of five malfunctioning systems up to $5,000 toward repairs.

Septic system failures are of particular concern because recent studies showed hot spots of the fecal bacteria Enterococci were consistently found at the mouth of the creek, where Parson’s empties into the ocean at Wallis Sands. Enterococci counts taken near the creek’s Marsh Road outlet in September 2015 exceeded 24,200 coliform per 100 milliliters after wet weather, and 18,963 col/100 mL after dry weather. These samples well exceed the state standard of 178 col/100 mL per single sample taken.

High levels of Enterococci are a concern for local residents and vacationers whose children play in the sand and tide pools near the affected areas. Reed noted signs have been posted to alert beach-goers.

“We haven’t had any actual beach closures, but we posted signs last summer that, during low tides, people should not play in those tide pools across from the outlets because the water sits and (bacteria) collects there ... but these are just recommendations,” she said.

Deborah Cross of Manchester had a family home on Wallis Sands Beach for 60 years and still considers Rye her home. She has been vocal on the Parsons Creek issue.

“Why has this bad situation been knowingly allowed to persist for so long, apparently endangering the health and well being of residents and visitors?” Cross asked, calling for more decisive action from the town. “We have enough studies and data collected. It’s time to make a decision to move forward ... let’s come up with a solution."

Rye hired FB Environmental Associates to develop its restoration plan to combat the high levels of Enterococci. Rye received funding for the plan, which was completed in 2011, under Section 319 of the Clean Water Act via the federal Environmental Protection Agency and NHDES. Soule said the town initially

received $42,000 from the state and now has $70,000 more to implement the restoration project's second phase.

“During phase one we installed five best management practices to defer some of the runoff," Reed said. "We also planted two rain gardens in the impaired watershed, which helped the runoff, and we took steps to bring in septic-sniffing dogs to find some hot areas."

The second phase has begun, and in addition to septic system monitoring and outreach, it includes implementing two to four more structural best management practices, such as the addition of rain gardens and buffers from 2015 to 2017. The rain gardens and buffers must go on town property and will likely be installed at a site along Marsh Road, according to Reed. The goal is to reduce water body pollution from fertilizers, pesticides and other sources during periods of storms and wet weather.

Soule acknowledged studying impaired watersheds often frustrates the public because it is time-consuming, involves lengthy and constant monitoring of bacteria levels and will require further monitoring.

“Of all pollutant sources, bacteria is one of the most difficult, frustrating and challenging," Soule said. "It’s a very difficult pollution source to run down ... It takes a long time to see water quality benefits, the key is to not give up, you have to continue to refine your approach and take advantage of new technology."

“(Parsons Creek) didn’t get impaired overnight, it took years and years, and it’s not going to get cleaned up overnight," Reed said. "It’s a community effort. We need all residents as well as the town to clean up together. We welcome citizens to come join us at the forum on Jan. 13."
