



Septic system ruins neighbor's yard

Man worried that sewage leak also may create health problems for his family; owner trying to resolve issue

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Paul Hansen moved into his home on Dexter Avenue in Rossville in 2002. About a year later, he noticed that a section of ground in his backyard was always moist, and the grass was lush and high, more so than the surrounding greenery.

There was also that unpleasant smell.

"You think you're buying your dream home, and it turns out to be a nightmare," Hansen said, standing in his back yard, a mess of trenches permeated by a foul odor.

Upon tearing up the ground, he found the culprit -- part of a Woodrow Road home's septic system was buried underneath his yard. Even worse, it was damaged and leaking into the soil.

Mara Epstein, a lawyer with Lieberman & Blecher in Princeton, N.J., is working with the Hansens to get the situation resolved.

"There's a sewer discharge on my client's property, and it's been happening for a long time," she said.

An environmental consultant to the law firm said in June that there is sewage in subsurface soils in the trenches around the pipes, and on the downslope leading to the house.

Although the summer heat, which magnified the smell, is starting to subside, Hansen bemoaned the loss of his back yard.

"My kid's childhood is being neglected," said Hansen. "He can't go out into the yard. And I worry about my wife. She's pregnant, and I wonder how this is affecting her health."

He said they couldn't open their windows, or risk the smell wafting into the house, and planned on discarding toys and yard equipment for fear they are contaminated.

"Everyone has to do their job," Hansen said. "It shouldn't have to take this long to get my yard back."

David Burton, the owner of the home on Woodrow Avenue, blamed the problem on builders who put in the Rossville Greens housing development behind his home, where the Hansens live.

"The developers broke the pipes open, and left them in the ground," Burton said. "I'm working with Mr. Hansen to find some kind of solution to keep the septic overflow out of his yard."

The company, he said, is no longer in business.

Burton added that the reason part of his tank is on Hansen's property stems from a dispute with Sharrotts Development over the boundary line in 1999, when he lost some of the property connected to his Sandy Ground home.

"A section of my land became a section of his property," said Burton.

According to the city Health Department, Burton was issued violations in November 2003, and on Sept. 1, for septic leaks, which he is responsible for fixing.

People who come in contact with sewage risk such maladies as E. coli infection, fecal coliform and exposure to other bacteria.

Under the health code, the conditions in Hansen's back yard are a health hazard and illegal, the Health Department said.

Burton said he is contacting sewer companies to get the problem rectified.

"We want to amicably resolve this, but we're getting to the point of no return," said Ms. Epstein. "We're not shy. We will sue if this isn't taken care of."

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