

## It's Official: R.I. Cesspools on Their Way Out

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By TIM FAULKNER/ecoRI News staff

PROVIDENCE — Topher Hamblett was a constant presence at the Statehouse this spring. As the top lobbyist for Save The Bay, he spent most afternoons among lawmakers continuing the environmental group's eight-year effort to ban Rhode Island's remaining cesspools.

"This was not an easy thing to do," Hamblett said during a July 22 signing ceremony of the legislation on the lawn of Save The Bay's headquarters overlooking upper Narragansett Bay.

He credited lawmakers for sticking up for the bill even when it faced stiff resistance from influential groups such as the Rhode Island Association of Realtors.



*Rep. Teresa Tanzi, a longtime proponent of banning cesspools, spoke at the July 22 bill signing. (Tim Faulkner/ecoRI News)*

Rep. Teresa Tanzi, D-South Kingstown, the sponsor of the House bill, was recognized for her persistence, demonstrated by her bringing a colander to hearings to show the inability of cesspools to retain waste.

"Water never stops moving," Tanzi said during the recent ceremony, explaining that water traveling above and below ground is prone to contamination.

Tanzi stressed the high cost of replacing a cesspool as the loudest complaint against an outright prohibition on them. Switching to a new septic system costs about \$15,000, and connecting to a sewer line is about \$3,500. To soften the financial hit, the new law ties future cesspool closures to the sale of a property, when the expense can be wrapped into a larger financial transaction. The new owner has a year to make the upgrade. The state also offers two loan programs for cesspool replacement and sewage connections. Exemptions can also be granted for financial hardship. Currently, Rhode Island has about 25,000 cesspools in operation. New cesspool construction has been banned since 1968, while existing cesspools were allowed to operate as long as they worked properly and weren't within 200 feet of Narragansett Bay or a water supply.

Advocates for cesspools bans say that even a properly functioning cesspool is harmful, as it simply pushes raw, untreated sewage and other waste underground, where it easily migrates to drinking-water sources and carrying with it viruses such as salmonella. The waste can also wash into waterways during rainstorms and cause bacteria/nutrient problems and beach closures. The added nitrogen load contributes to the oxygen-sucking eutrophication that kills sea life, especially in shallow parts of Narragansett Bay.

According to Save The Bay, groundwater located near cesspools contains up to 77,000 times the amount of fecal material as groundwater close to conventional septic systems. Warwick, which has 39 miles of coastline and about 1,300 cesspools, has been part of the cesspool debate for decades. Environmentalists have linked polluted runoff and cesspools to nearby beach closures and eutrophication in the bay. The city has been expanding sewers for decades and providing incentives for connections.

Several neighborhoods, such as the Governor Francis Farms, presented some of the greatest opposition to cesspool bans. Resident groups accused the city sewer authority of mismanagement and said mandatory sewer connections and fees were too expensive and unfairly assessed.

Real-estate agents opposed the legislation because they worried that tying the cost of a sewer hookup or new septic system to a transaction would hurt business. This year, however, the legislation received support for the Rhode Island Builders Association, which welcomed the law for creating uniform statewide building standards.

At the signing ceremony, Gov. Gina Raimondo said the new law creates construction jobs, makes the state cleaner and healthier, and subsequently increases property values.

"It's long past time for (cesspools) to go away," she said.