

LAND USE FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. How do I access my EH files?

- Go to www.scceh.com
- You may either:
- select the blue text button that says: “Environmental Health Parcel and Facility Electronic File Search”
or
- Select the menu tab “Santa Cruz EHS Files” at the top-right of the page
- Select “All Documents”
- Type the property’s Assessor’s Parcel Number (APN) or address into the search bar (APN is more reliable)
- APN format: ___ - ___ - ___ (for example 045-123-45)

2. How do I interpret the EH files?

You should review septic pumping records 10 to 20 years back and see if the system has been maintained. Review the early septic permits, you will be able to determine the size of your tank, the amount of leaching and the location from the permit and plot plan.

3. Can I add a bedroom to my home?

If your septic system is functioning, meets current standards and can accommodate the extra wastewater from increased occupancy, this may be possible. A Site Evaluation Application, with 2 plot plans and fees must be submitted to review your parcel history, determine which testing is required if any and make a site visit.

4. Can I add an Accessory Dwelling Unit to my property?

Generally, if your property has over 0.5 acres and does not have environmental challenges, this may be possible to install a conventional system. Parcels under this size may require an enhanced treatment system. A Site Evaluation Application, with 2 plot plans and fees must be submitted to review your parcel history, determine which testing is required if any and make a site visit.

5. How do I build on undeveloped land using a septic system??

The Land Use staff will process applications for Site Evaluations, Sewage Disposal System permits and Water Well Permits (for 4 connections or less).

To understand the application process, please refer to the Road Map to Development Handout.

Undeveloped parcels – you will need a Site Evaluation application, 2 sets of plot plans and fees. The site will require EH staff to review the history of your parcel, surrounding parcel search, observe the soil profile on site and witness percolations testing conducted by your Land Use consultant. If you are in a known area for groundwater you will be required to conduct a Winter Water Test. This is conducted generally in the wet weather season anywhere from December to April. After you have obtained information the soils, slopes and environmental concerns, your consultant will design the septic system in accordance with your water usage on the property and apply for a permit.

There are lot size restrictions in the various areas of the county. For example, the San Lorenzo Valley requires a one (1) acre minimum to build.

Developed parcels – you will need a Site Evaluation application, 2 sets of plot plans and fees. The site will require EH staff to review the history of your parcel, surrounding parcel search, observe the soil profile on site and witness percolations testing conducted by your Land Use Consultant. If you are in a known area for groundwater you will be required to conduct a Winter Water Test. This is conducted generally in the wet weather season anywhere from December to April. After you have obtained information the soils, slopes and environmental concerns, your consultant will design the septic system in accordance with your water usage on the property and apply for a permit.

On developed parcels, if you have well documented records, you may be able to omit the Site Evaluation and apply for a permit with 2 plot plans and fee.

6. Why are properties in the designated Sandhills required to have enhanced treatment?

San Lorenzo Valley and Scotts Valley, La Selva Beach and parts of Bonny Doon have high nitrates recorded in monitoring wells. The nitrates come from both effluent from wastewater and fertilizers. We are protecting our groundwater sources by requiring enhanced treatment systems on parcels in the Sandhills for percolations rates less than 5 minutes per inch and through the county if the rates are less than 1 minute per inch. Most areas designated as Sandhills Habitat have sandy soils called Zayante Coarse Sands or Baywood series which have fast percolation rates less than 5 minutes per inch and will require Enhanced Treatment of wastewater to protect groundwater source.

7. My neighbor's septic system is failing, what can I do?

If you see a failure, take dated photos and contact our office. We will send the District Inspector out to investigate. Your name is confidential.

Odor complaints cannot be followed up on. There are no existing regulations to address odors which could come from a variety of sources, detritus, compost piles, natural degradation or plant material.

8. What is an Enhanced or Alternative Wastewater Treatment System?

Conventional or standard septic systems have a septic tank and leaching area. The septic tank separates the solids and sludge in first compartment or 2/3rd of the tank with a baffle/divider. The other 1/3rd portion of the septic tank allows the wastewater or effluent to be directed to the leaching or disposal area. The leaching area could be gravel trenches, chambers, or pits.

Enhanced wastewater treatment systems include an aerobic treatment system between the tank and the leaching area. The leaching area could be any of the above or a sand filter, drip tubing or pressurized leaching system.

(Refer to the Enhanced Sewage Disposal System FAQ handout for more information)

9. How do I legalize unpermitted structures on my property?

You will need a Site Evaluation application, 2 sets of plot plans and fees. The site will require EH staff to review the history of your parcel, surround parcel search, observe a soil profile on site and witness percolations testing conducted by your Land Use Consultant. If the area is known for groundwater you will be required to conduct a Winter Water Test. This is conducted in the wet weather season typically from December to April. After you have obtained information the soils, slopes and environmental concerns, your consultant will design the septic system in accordance with your water usage on the property and apply for a sewage disposal permit.

10. Can I obtain a permit for a holding tank, vault toilet or composting toilet for new development?

Holding tanks, vault toilets and composting toilets are not approved for new development.

Santa Cruz County Sewage Disposal Regulations require that an undeveloped parcel must be able to support a home's wastewater discharge without harm to the environment. In addition to demonstrating that you have room for the sewage disposal system, you must also show that the expansion area is available for future repairs.

Only if there is an existing legal, permitted, habitable house and there is no room for a septic system would we allow a holding tank to be installed with recorded monitoring conditions on the parcel.