

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Freeland sewer and water reuse project?

The Freeland sewer and water reuse project refers to plans to develop an ecological wastewater system. The plan calls for replacing or retrofitting existing septic tanks with a septic tank effluent pump (STEP). Wastewater would be pumped through a pressurized sewer line to a wastewater treatment plant. After treatment, high quality reclaimed water could be used for non-potable uses such as irrigation (including the forest area owned by FWSD) and groundwater recharge.

Why is this project needed?

Developing a sewer system for Freeland is designed to meet four primary objectives:

1. Address persistent pollution in Holmes Harbor resulting from poorly performing septic systems
2. Protect groundwater from contamination caused by poorly performing septic systems
3. Establish the infrastructure necessary to support planned growth within Freeland's urban core – creating opportunities for businesses, jobs, affordable housing and a revitalized downtown – while preserving the rural character of surrounding area
4. Extend the life of our groundwater supply by creating high quality reclaimed water for irrigation and groundwater recharge.

What's wrong with the septic systems we have now?

Septic systems are intended for rural areas where residential and business development density is very low. They work best when there is sufficient area, good soils and low water tables – conditions that support the bacterial breakdown of sewage.

In Freeland there are often shallow drain fields over hard-packed soil. When water tables are high, sewage gets washed away before it can be broken down by bacteria. That partially treated sewage then flows downhill to some body of water, drainage ditches, a creek, or the groundwater. This polluted water has been finding its way to Holmes Harbor, causing swimming beach closures, closed shellfish harvesting, algae blooms and other problems.

The problems we are seeing with Freeland's beach and in Holmes Harbor are interrelated with Puget Sound water quality problems. Department of Ecology monitoring shows low dissolved oxygen levels in Holmes Harbor which harm aquatic life. Many communities around Puget Sound are taking the initiative to improve their local and regional water quality.

What does “water reuse” refer to and why do we need it?

The proposed wastewater treatment system will process sewage into high quality, Class A reclaimed water, which can then be reused for non-potable uses such as irrigation.

Reclaiming water is done through sophisticated biological and filtration processes. The result is reclaimed water that is safer than many existing surface and groundwater sources. Washington’s rigorous standards for reclaimed water are designed to protect public health.

Reusing reclaimed water for non-potable uses preserves Freeland’s aquifers for drinking water. It is a drought-proof source of water available on a year-round basis. In addition to extending Freeland’s water supply, reclaimed water is an important tool for reducing discharge of untreated treated wastewater into Puget Sound and Holmes Harbor.

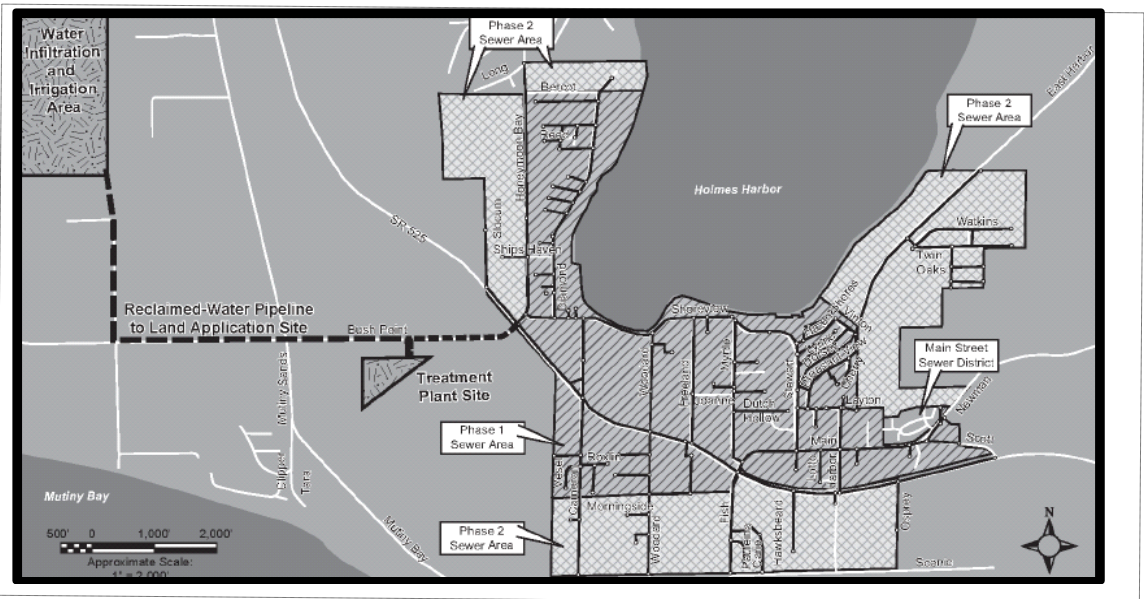
Can I use my existing septic tank if a STEP system is built?

Each septic tank needs to be inspected to determine if it can be converted to a STEP system or whether a new tank will be needed that is specifically designed to be used with a pump system. Sometimes existing septic tanks can be used, but more often than not they are not configured correctly or in too poor a condition to be of use in a STEP system.

What are the boundaries of the sewer service area?

To keep the project affordable for property owners, the sewer and water reuse project is being planned in two phases. The first phase would serve most residences and businesses located within the Freeland NMUGA that are not already served by the Holmes Harbor or Main Street sewer districts. Phase one includes the areas of highest density, as well as those locations in the Holmes Harbor Shellfish Protection District where a concern about poorly performing septic systems exist.

Phase two comprises adjoining areas of the NMUGA that have lesser density and are further from Holmes Harbor.



The LID under consideration only applies to the phase one area.

What would switching to sewer mean in terms of land use planning?

Island County has designated Freeland as a Non-Municipal Urban Growth Area (NMUGA). That designation and the Freeland Sub-Area Plan changes future land use patterns within Freeland. With sewer, property owners within the Freeland NMUGA will have more options to develop their properties or businesses – potentially resulting in higher density housing and new or expanded businesses. Meanwhile, rural areas outside the NMUGA would stay much the same as they are now. This balance between planned economic development and environmental preservation is the intent behind Washington’s Growth Management Act and the Freeland Sub-Area Plan – focusing growth within NMUGAs while protecting rural areas from urban densities.

How much will this project cost?

The total cost of the project is estimated to be \$39.9 million. The cost to be financed will be known after subtracting all grants monies received. The FWSD has committed to raising at least \$15.5 million in grants before moving forward with construction.

How will the project be funded?

Funds will need to come from both private (via property assessments) and public sources (via grants and low interest loans).

To reduce property owner costs, FWSD is aggressively pursuing public funding. As noted above, it has so far secured \$5.5 million in grants, and district commissioners have committed to securing at least an additional \$10 million in grants.

To raise private revenues, FWSD is exploring the formation of a Local Improvement District (LID).

What is a Local Improvement District (LID)?

A Local Improvement District is a financing method designed to help property owners pay for public improvements (such as sewer and water lines, sidewalks and streetlights) that are of special benefit to their property and neighborhood. LIDs have a long history in Washington State and the procedures for creating an LID are addressed in the State Constitution as well as several sections of the Revised Code of Washington.

Why form an LID?

A key advantage of an LID is that it reduces the cost of improvements for individual property owners. The assessments are paid off over a number of years, typically 15 - 20 years, at relatively low interest rates. In addition, properties as a whole qualify for financing instead of individual properties qualifying for separate loans.

The formation of an LID will allow the project to apply for additional grant and low-interest loan funding from federal and state financing sources. Funding agencies have indicated that grants and low interest loans will be available once an LID is formed.

When will I know how much my property is being assessed?

Prior to the public hearing on LID formation, preliminary assessment notices will be mailed to all property owners within the boundaries of the proposed LID. The preliminary assessment is an estimate – the final assessment may vary (higher or lower) from the preliminary assessment. The final assessment will not be calculated until the LID is formed and project costs are known. This also allows the assessment to be reduced to reflect any grant or other funding that may be received.

Are there any restrictions on the amount of an assessment?

Yes. Two strict rules apply to all LID assessments:

- 1) An assessment may not exceed the special benefit to the property from the improvements; and
- 2) An assessment must be proportionate to other assessments of like properties within the LID.

Does LID formation mean the project will be constructed?

No. LID formation is an important stage in the process, but other factors need to be in place before proceeding with design and construction. As noted above, the FWSD board of commissioners has set a target to secure \$15.5 million in grants before proceeding to construction.

What happens if sufficient funding is not obtained to pay for the project?

In order to comply with the State's Growth Management Act, Island County and Freeland will need to revisit Freeland's status as a Non-Municipal Urban Growth Area and possibly develop a new plan or funding approach for developing sewers – a process that will likely take years (the current plan has been nine years in development). Meanwhile, the uncertainty that has made it difficult for Freeland residents and businesses to make plans for home improvements, business expansions, etc., will continue. And, without corrective measures for dealing with poorly performing septic systems, pollution in Holmes Harbor will likely worsen.

How can I learn more?

- Attend a public meeting. FWSD will continue to sponsor public meetings to share project information, answer questions and solicit input.
- Visit the project website. Project information, including additional Frequently Asked Question document and the FWSD's Public Involvement Plan are posted online: www.freelandwsd.com.
- Host or attend a neighborhood meeting. Contact FWSD if you want additional information or would like a project representative to meet with your neighborhood, business, civic or other group.

Contact FWSD

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FWSD
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