So, your septic system has failed. What's next?

This guide is intended to help property owners in an urban zoned area within a Sewer Utility service area understand what to do if their septic system is backing up into the house, leaking, sewage is surfacing, or otherwise meets the definition of a "failure" per BOH 13.08.152. It includes who to contact at each stage, and when you may be required to connect to public sewer.

FIRST: Contact a Certified Maintainer to determine what the issue is.

Always start by calling a **King County certified** On-site System Maintainer **(OSM)**. These professionals will inspect your septic system to identify the problem, complete repairs within their scope of work, and can help guide you on the appropriate next steps.

If it is a maintenance issue:

Some issues qualify as **Maintenance Issues** per BOH 13.08.245. If you have an approved record drawing or Time of Sale site sketch on file, the following may be repaired without a permit:

- Building sewer pipes (tightlines)
- Septic tank lids and risers
- Baffles
- Pumps and pump control floats
- Pipes between tanks or from tank to distribution box
- Drainfield inspection boxes and ports
- Distribution boxes
- Control panels and timers
- Components of proprietary treatment units (e.g., aerators, filters)
- UV disinfection units
- Jetting of pressure distribution pipes or PVC gravity pipes

If the repair qualifies:

- The OSM may complete the work.

If the repair does not qualify, or there is no drawing on file, a permit will be required.

If it is more than a maintenance issue:

When the issue is beyond what an OSM can do without a permit:

- A certified Master Installer may handle repairs and reconfigurations.
- A licensed septic designer or professional engineer **(P.E.)** must evaluate if the system needs replacement.

If you are inside the **Urban Growth Area (UGA) and a sewer utility's service area:**

- Contact your **sewer utility** to request a **Sewer Availability Certificate** or written confirmation by email. This is required for Public Health review of any permits for repair or replacement.
- *Find your utility with the Septic & Group B records tool.*

- **Stay in touch with your utility**: after confirming availability, ask about their connection requirements and request cost estimates for sewer connection. Ask about financing, rebates, or cost-sharing programs to offset the cost of connection.

Remember, Replacing the Septic System is likely NOT an OPTION!

In urban areas where sewer service is available within 200 feet, only **conforming** septic systems are allowed. Some jurisdictions may still require connection to sewer even if a conforming system can be installed, so it is important to confirm requirements directly with the local sewer utility.

1. If the parcel is small, it is unlikely that a septic system will be conforming. A **licensed septic designer or P.E.** can evaluate your site.
2. They determine if a **conforming septic system** can be designed and installed.
3. If a conforming system can be installed, they can submit a **Site Application** to Public Health for review.
    I. Before you hire a septic designer to submit a proposal, see Appendix A for general guidelines on estimating if a conforming system is feasible.

If a Conforming System Cannot Be Installed

If the designer or P.E. finds your site cannot support a conforming system (due to lot size or other site constraints):

- **BOH Title 13.04.050 requires connection to public sewer** if a sewer main is within 200 feet of the property line and the sewer utility allows the connection.

What you must do:

1. Contact your sewer utility.
2. Request a **cost estimate to connect**.
3. Ask about **financial assistance, rebates, or cost-sharing programs**.
4. Get at least **three contractor estimates** for the connection.
5. If the estimates are extremely high, discuss the situation with the sewer utility to find out if there are any other options for connection.

Continue to engage with your sewer utility throughout the process.

Next Steps

- If a conforming septic system is approved, proceed with the installation under your designer's guidance.
- If sewer connection is required, coordinate with your sewer utility and chosen contractor to complete the connection.
- If the estimated cost for sewer connection is extremely unaffordable, there may be limited options available to propose a waiver for the requirement to connect to public sewer by installing a septic system that is as close to conforming as possible. **Note, this is an expensive option that may or may not be allowed.** You may wish to explore the waiver process with your designer or P.E.. Read the Sewer Connection FAQ on the Understanding Septic to Sewer conversions webpage for more information.

Quick Professional Contact Guide

- **OSM (Maintainer):** Inspect system, perform Minor Repairs, report repairs in OnlineRME.
- **Certified Master Installer:** Perform larger repairs and reconfigurations with permit.
- **Licensed Designer or P.E.:** Evaluate property, design replacement systems, submit Site Design application.
- **Sewer Utility:** Provide Sewer Availability Certificates, connection approvals, cost estimates, and financing options.
- **Public Health – Seattle & King County:** Review proposals, issue permits, conduct inspections, and maintain repair/replacement records.

Appendix A: Guidelines to Determine if Your Lot Can Support a Conforming System

This appendix is intended as a guideline to help property owners get a rough sense of whether their lot might support a conforming septic system. We strongly encourage reviewing these points **before** investing in a septic designer or professional engineer to prepare a repair proposal. Keep in mind that these are only general guidelines. A licensed designer or engineer is the only way to obtain a definitive answer for your specific property.

1. What a "Conforming System" Means

A conforming septic system meets current **King County Board of Health Code, Title 13** requirements for design, size, and location. These systems:

- Are designed and approved using current soil and site standards.
- Provide adequate wastewater treatment and protection of public health and the environment.
- Meet all required setbacks, including distances to wells, surface water, property lines, and buildings.

If your lot cannot meet these standards, you may still be eligible for a **nonconforming repair** or an **alternative treatment system**, but this can only be determined by a licensed designer or engineer in coordination with Public Health.

2. Basic Site and Lot Conditions

The table below gives a general overview of the lot and soil conditions that are typically favorable for a conforming septic system in King County.

Condition	Favorable for a Conforming System	Potential Concern or Limitation
Lot Size and Water Source	At least **10,000 sq. ft.** if served by **public water**, or **5 acres** if served by an **individual (private) water source**	Smaller lots may not meet required setbacks or have enough room for both a primary and reserve drainfield, especially when excessively developed
Soil Type and Depth	Natural, undisturbed soils with at least **18 inches of suitable soil** above restrictive layers or groundwater	Shallow, compacted, or disturbed soils (such as fill) may not be usable
Groundwater Depth	Seasonal high-water table is **at least 18 inches below the bottom** of the proposed drainfield	Shallow groundwater may require engineered or advanced treatment systems

Condition	Favorable for a Conforming System	Potential Concern or Limitation
Topography (Slope)	Gentle to moderate slopes	Steep slopes may cause seepage or erosion and can limit drainfield placement
Critical Areas	Located outside **critical areas** such as wetlands, steep slopes, and Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas	Systems in or near critical areas may not be allowed or may require additional review
Setbacks (Title 13, Table 13.28-2)	Enough room to meet: 100 ft from **wells**, 100 ft from **surface water**, 100 ft from **stormwater ponds/infiltration**, 10 ft from **property lines**, and 5 ft from **buildings**	Smaller or irregular lots may not meet setback requirements
Lot Modifications	Soil has **not been graded or filled** in the proposed septic area	Septic systems cannot be installed in **fill material**
System Layout	Sufficient area for both a **primary system** and a **reserve area** that meet all setback and soil requirements	Lack of space for a reserve area means the site cannot support a conforming system

Some information specific to your property can be found using King County's iMap. Put in the parcel number or address and click on the **Layers List** button →  and turn on the Environmentally Sensitive Areas and Elevation Contours to estimate the viability of a conforming septic system.

3. Common Limiting Factors

If your lot has one or more of the following conditions, a conforming system may not be possible or may require significant engineering or alternative technology:

Possible Limitation	Why It Matters
Less than 10,000 sq. ft. on public water or less than 5 acres on a private well	May not meet minimum land area requirements or provide adequate space for setbacks and reserve area
High groundwater or shallow soils	Limits treatment effectiveness and system lifespan
Lot contains fill material	Fill soils are not considered stable or predictable for septic use
Located within or near a critical area	Additional protections may restrict drainfield locations
Steep slopes	Increases risk of surfacing effluent or slope failure
Existing hardscapes or development	May block usable soil areas or access for installation

4. Steps to Take Before Hiring a Designer

You can save time and reduce costs by gathering site information before hiring a septic professional.

Step	What You Can Do
Check your property records	Review your septic system records on the King County Online Permit Center to see what type of system you currently have.
Sketch your lot	Note wells, driveways, steep slopes, surface water, and outbuildings.
Observe your soil and drainage	Check for soggy areas or pooling after rain, which may indicate poor drainage.
Verify your lot history	Determine if your lot has been graded or filled. Septic systems cannot be installed in fill areas.
Consider nearby constraints	Look for things like wells, stormwater infiltration, surface water or anything listed in KC BOH Title 13, Table 13.28-2 which requires setbacks.

Ask yourself the following questions before investing in design work:

- **Does the lot have enough room for both a new system and a reserve area?**
  If the only open space on your property could fit one drainfield but not a reserve area, a conforming system is unlikely.
- **Are there nearby wells, surface water, or storm infiltration systems within 100 feet of the proposed location?**
  If yes, required setbacks under BOH Title 13 will likely prevent installation of a conforming system in that area.
- **Are there critical areas or steep slopes that require protective setbacks?**
  If much of your lot includes wetlands, streams, or slopes over 30 percent, usable space for a drainfield may be too limited for a conforming design.
- **Has the property been graded or filled in the area where a system or reserve area might go?**
  If yes, that area cannot be used for a conforming drainfield since systems must be installed in undisturbed native soil.

5. Key Takeaways

- These guidelines are intended for **early planning** and **general understanding**.
- Only a **licensed septic system designer or engineer** can confirm whether your lot can support a conforming system.
- King County Public Health can help you locate existing records, understand permitting requirements, and connect with qualified professionals.