Statement to the Archuleta County Board of County Commissioners

Regarding Transfer of Title NAWT Inspections

My name is Bryan Denham, and I am a certified NAWT inspector serving Archuleta County, Colorado. I am writing to express my continued support for Transfer of Title inspections and to share additional information based on my experience in the field and the growing need for these inspections in our community.

Transfer of Title Inspections

Transfer of Title inspections are an important tool for protecting our environment, public health, property values, and both buyers and sellers of real estate. They provide an opportunity to identify failing onsite wastewater treatment systems before those failures result in environmental contamination, property damage, public health concerns, or unexpected and costly repairs for new homeowners.

My Recent Experience

Over the past ten months, I have completed 26 Transfer of Title inspections in Archuleta County. Of those 26 inspections, 13 revealed leaking or structurally failing septic tanks. That means that 50 percent of the systems I inspected had tanks with significant failures.

I also identified two flooded leach fields during these inspections.

Most of these properties were typical three-bedroom homes with wastewater system designs allowing flows of up to 450 gallons per day. Of the 13 failing tanks, only three were older block-built tanks. The majority were concrete tanks exhibiting severe hydrogen sulfide corrosion and deterioration, including leaking mid-seams and compromised structural integrity.

This is important because it demonstrates that failing septic systems are not simply an issue associated with very old systems or a particular type of construction. Concrete tanks that may appear to be substantial and durable can also deteriorate to the point that they no longer reliably contain wastewater.

When a septic tank is compromised at the mid-seam or otherwise loses its structural integrity, wastewater can escape into the surrounding soil instead of remaining contained within the treatment system. For perspective, a system designed for 450 gallons per day represents approximately 164,250 gallons of wastewater per year. If a significant portion of that wastewater escapes because of a failed tank, the potential environmental impact is substantial. Across 13 failing tanks, the potential volume represented by those design flows is more than 2.1 million gallons per year.

That number should not be interpreted to mean that every gallon from every failing system is necessarily entering the ground untreated. Rather, it illustrates the scale of the wastewater involved and why identifying structural failures before they become larger problems matters.

Environmental and Community Impacts

Many properties in Archuleta County are located within watersheds, near streams and rivers, or on relatively small acreage parcels where neighboring homes are nearby. Several of the failing systems I have inspected were located in these types of sensitive areas.

When septic tanks fail or leach fields become saturated, wastewater can enter groundwater, migrate toward surface waters, or affect adjacent properties. In these circumstances, a failing onsite wastewater treatment system is not simply a private matter between a property owner and a septic contractor. A failure can affect neighbors, local waterways, wildlife, and the broader environment that residents and visitors depend upon.

Flooded leach fields present another serious concern. When a leach field is no longer functioning properly, wastewater can surface above ground, creating a potential public health and environmental

hazard. These conditions can expose people, pets, wildlife, and nearby water resources to untreated sewage.

The purpose of a Transfer of Title inspection is not to create a problem where one does not exist. It is to identify problems that already exist.

The Larger Wastewater Infrastructure Picture

There is also a larger wastewater-infrastructure issue occurring right here in our community.

The Town of Pagosa Springs is currently confronting significant problems with its aging sewer infrastructure. According to the Town, approximately $80–$100 million is needed to address aging sewer pipes, construct a new wastewater treatment facility, maintain existing infrastructure, and make other necessary repairs and upgrades. In response, voters approved a 1% sales tax dedicated to repairing and modernizing the Town's sewer collection system, which took effect January 1, 2026.

I believe there is an important lesson in this for Archuleta County.

It would be counterintuitive for the County to move away from one of the simplest opportunities it has to identify failing wastewater infrastructure at the individual-property level at the same time that our community is investing millions of dollars to address failing wastewater infrastructure at the municipal level.

The scale is different, but the principle is the same: identify wastewater problems early, correct them before they become larger failures, and protect the environment and the people who depend on these systems.

Transfer of Title inspections provide exactly that opportunity for individual properties.

Benefits to Archuleta County

Transfer of Title inspections also help protect County resources. By identifying failing wastewater systems before they create environmental or public health problems, inspections can reduce the potential need for future investigations, enforcement actions, water quality complaints, emergency responses, and remediation efforts.

Preventing contamination is generally far less costly and disruptive than addressing it after it occurs.

These inspections also place responsibility for identifying and addressing an existing system deficiency primarily within the property transaction, rather than allowing a known or unknown failure to become a future burden on County staff, neighboring property owners, or taxpayers.

In my experience, the inspection process is doing exactly what it is intended to do: finding problems that need to be found.

The fact that 13 of the 26 systems I have inspected recently had leaking or structurally failing tanks should be viewed as evidence of the need for continued oversight, not as a reason to eliminate the process that uncovered those failures.

A Balanced and Preventative Approach

I understand that property owners do not want unnecessary costs or burdens placed upon them, particularly during an already complicated real estate transaction.

However, Transfer of Title inspections are not intended to punish property owners or make property transactions unnecessarily difficult. They provide an opportunity for transparency and informed decision-making.

Buyers deserve to know the condition of a property's wastewater treatment system before completing a purchase. Sellers benefit from identifying problems before a sale is completed rather than having a buyer discover a serious failure afterward. Neighbors benefit when failing systems are repaired before they create environmental or health concerns. And the County benefits when wastewater problems are addressed before they become larger problems requiring public involvement.

Transfer of Title inspections are one of the few opportunities to evaluate an onsite wastewater treatment system at the point when ownership changes hands. That makes the transfer process an important opportunity for prevention.

The goal should not simply be to identify failures. The goal should be to identify them early enough that they can be corrected before they become more expensive, more damaging, and more difficult to resolve.

Conclusion

Over the past ten months, I have conducted 26 Transfer of Title inspections, with 13 leaking or structurally failing septic tanks identified, demonstrating that these are not hypothetical concerns. These failures are occurring in Archuleta County today.

At the same time, our neighboring community is confronting tens of millions of dollars in wastewater infrastructure needs and has taken significant steps to fund repairs and modernization. That situation reinforces the importance of a preventative approach to wastewater infrastructure at every level.

I respectfully encourage the Board to continue supporting Transfer of Title NAWT inspections as a practical, preventative, and effective tool for protecting Archuleta County's environment, water resources, public health, property owners, neighboring properties, and future residents.

These inspections are not about creating unnecessary burdens. They are about finding problems before those problems become emergencies.

If we have an effective way to identify failing wastewater systems before they become emergencies, I believe we should continue using it.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Bryan Denham
Certified NAWT Inspector
Archuleta County, Colorado

Source for Pagosa Springs wastewater infrastructure figures: Town of Pagosa Springs, “Saving Our Sewers (SOS).”