

Sewage-sniffing dog may diagnose Kittery septic problems

By **Dave Choate**

dchoate@seacoastonline.com

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KITTERY, Maine -- You may have heard of bomb-sniffing dogs or drug-sniffing dogs, but chances are this is the first you've heard of Sable the sewage-sniffing dog.

Kittery is among a handful of Seacoast communities considering making use of the Michigan-based canine with the unusual sniffer, who can detect leaks in septic systems and other sources of potential contamination.

Phyllis Ford of the Spruce Creek Association said the dog could be in the Seacoast for a week as part of that organization's ongoing efforts to identify the sources of illicit or accidental human waste discharge into Spruce Creek and its surrounding watershed.

"Sable can help us (track) where there's a hot spot," she said. Forrest Bell, the owner of FB Environmental in Portland, said his company is working with towns to determine which on the Seacoast will be involved in addition to Kittery.

Bell said the dog could provide a useful, economical tool in combating bacteria flowing into streams, rivers and the ocean, where it can contaminate water sources and cause problems that can include forced closure of shellfish beds. He estimated the cost to be from \$5,000 and \$10,000 for the entire week, split between communities.

If the canine finds a scent, Ford said the hope is that he will lead those involved in the project from the first sniff to the leak or illicit discharge. Bell said that according to the dog's trainer, environmental scientist Scott Reynolds, Sable will bark when he detects waste in storm drains and water sources, and from there the sewage can be tracked back to its source, he said.

"Everything we've seen so far suggests that this is very legitimate," Bell said, noting that one of his employees went to a presentation from Reynolds.

Bell said the hope is to have Sable and Reynolds in the area by late September or early October. Town Manager Jon Carter said Kittery is waiting to take Town Council tabled action on the item until the role of other towns involved becomes clearer.

With the aid of a grant, Ford said the group will also make use of a fluorometer to detect "optical brighteners," or substances in detergents which give off a fluorescent glow, in Kittery's waters. In all cases, Ford said the group hopes to alert homeowners or businesses with issues that there are grants available to fix the problems.

Sable is a 3-year-old German Shepherd mix who began the sewage sniffing training in March of 2007 after being adopted from a Lake Odessa animal shelter. For more information on Sable, visit sableTheSniffer.com.

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