

Septic cleaner started business to move home

'Country boy' loves meeting country people

July 20, 2010

At 64, Eddie Maxwell describes himself as a country boy and is not bashful about discussing what he does for a living.

Maxwell has been working around wastewater for most of his working life.

As a septic tank cleaner, the Gallatin resident said his favorite part of his job is meeting the people who don't live inside city limits and therefore aren't on city sewer — country people.

"I really enjoy talking to people and meeting country people, because I'm a country boy," he said. "I was born and raised on an old farm and I've worked hard all my life. I love fishing and bluegrass music."

On the flip side, he said the hardest part of the job is the labor involved with digging the three-foot hole to access most septic tank lids, especially when many homeowners either don't know they use septic or don't know where the tank is located.

And sometimes the job gets messy. About three years ago, Maxwell learned the hard way to be cautious when opening a clogged tank on a hillside.

"I got covered up," he said. "I opened it and it all came out on me."

But Maxwell takes the good with the bad, and has no plans to retire any time soon. Despite offers from other companies to buy him out, he said as long as he is healthy and able to work he will do so.

"It supplements my income, plus I want to work, I want to stay busy," he said. "I'm not the type to sit around the house."

Savings spent on septic truck

As a teenager, when Maxwell wasn't working on his family's farm in East Tennessee, he learned how to pump septic tanks from a man who did it for a living

who allowed him to ride along and help.

When he got older, Maxwell worked in construction for some years before getting a job in the mid-1980s with American Airlines as a fleet service clerk dumping lavatories from the cabins. When American closed its Nashville hub in the mid-1990s, Maxwell was transferred to the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, where he stayed until his retirement in 2001.

As soon as he was transferred, he realized he needed to come up with a plan to get out of Texas.

"There's good people in Texas, but I like Tennessee better," he said. "I wanted to come home."

In 1998, he purchased an old truck and fixed it up with a tank and a pump and began flying between Nashville and Dallas on his days off from the airport. He obtained a license from the state to pump septic and worked part time to build his business.

When he moved back to Tennessee in 2001, the transition was scary at first, he said. After all, he was striking out on his own at 56 years old and financing the business himself.

"Yeah, I had savings — spent it all on a septic truck," he said.

But during the three years that he split his time between Texas and Tennessee, he built up enough



Eddie Maxwell started a one-man septic cleaning business after he retired from American Airlines in 2001. (SARAH KINGSBURY/The News Examiner)

security to make the leap.

"I checked it out pretty good; I knew there was a demand for it," he said.

Since he started working full-time, Maxwell said business has been good, and on average he works about six days a week pumping about 350 tanks per year.

"I offer service that a big majority of the people need," he said. "At some point in time, if they've got a septic tank, they're going to have to have it pumped."

'Out of sight, out of mind'

Maxwell said it is his mission to educate people to quit putting things down the drain that aren't biodegradable.

A septic tank is only designed to handle wastewater, so even a garbage disposal can cause it to back up faster, Maxwell said. Certain types of bacteria that live in septic tanks eat specific kinds of waste; everything else becomes filler that simply sits until the tank is pumped.

"Cigarette butts and baby wipes and all that stuff, you find septic tanks full of them," he said. "Bacteria won't eat that stuff up."

If a homeowner is careful about what is put down the drain, the tank will only need to be pumped every three to five years to remove sludge that builds up over time.

But one problem Maxwell said he often deals with is that homeowners don't know to have their tank pumped in the first place. When the septic tank backs up, household tasks like laundry and dishes, or common hygienic practices like bathing and toilet flushing, come to a halt. At that point, the frantic homeowner will call a company like Maxwell's needing immediate service.

It's his goal to educate septic users so that they never end up in such a situation.

"A lot of people move from the city to the country and they don't realize they've even got a septic tank," Maxwell said. "When they flush the commode they have no idea where it's going; out of sight, out of mind."

Reporter Sarah Kingsbury can be contacted at 575-7161 or skingsbury@mtcngroup.com.

JUST THE FACTS

Name: Eddie Maxwell Septic Cleaning

Contact: 452-3986

How long in business: 12 years

Business type: Septic pumping

Startup capital: \$40,000

Inspiration: "Helping people."

Motto: "Honest, dependable service."

Role model: H.T. Hall, owned a septic pumping company in Cumberland County

Best lesson learned: "Don't take the lid off on a hillside."

Rookie advice: "Be prepared for hard, physical work."