

Instead of the usual shovels for a ceremonial ground breaking, politicians preened for the camera yesterday at Camp Letts brandishing golden plungers.

"Flushing is very important," deadpanned County Executive Janet S. Owens, as officials celebrated the beginning of a \$1.6 million project to connect the 100-year-old sleep-away camp to the Mayo sewage treatment plant.

"If we hadn't done it, Camp Letts would have been shut down," Ms. Owens said.

The county is paying the largest share of the cost, chipping in \$800,000. U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Mechanicsville, was on hand to celebrate the \$600,000 in federal funding, with the rest coming from the state.

Ironically, the camp on 219 acres in Edgewater was originally founded by John Letts in 1906, then the owner of the Sanitary Grocery. Of course, the name had little to do with sewage.

Four years ago, the septic system on the YMCA property started to fail.

Thirteen tanks collect raw sewage, which is then pumped up the hill about 37 feet higher and filtered into a septic field. That system was leaking, likely allowing nitrogen and phosphorous to pour down into the creeks that feed the Rhode River.

Work will begin shortly on the upgrade, installing 5,500 square feet of pipe and a 20-foot-by-20-foot tank on the property. Construction is scheduled to be finished by the end of next summer.

Of course, the kids don't care much about sewage. They are thinking about paint ball wars, water skiing, sports, swimming, capture the flag, sailing and wave boarding.

Nathan Mahany, preparing with his group to practice a skit for their first night at camp around the bonfire, said he likes the chance to get away from his parents and younger sister in Washington, D.C.

"I plan on coming back next summer, too," said Nathan, 11, spending his third summer at the camp.

Without the upgrade to public sewer, the camp could have been closed, officials said.

"It's important that this oasis doesn't turn into a disaster," said Angie Reese Hawkins, president and CEO of the Metropolitan Washington YMCA.