

Cesspools at 12 Suffolk parks to be removed, officials say

<https://www.newsday.com/long-island/suffolk/suffolk-county-cesspools-v4z8yf14>



Suffolk County's Blydenburgh Park is one of 12 with outdated cesspools that the federal government says should have been removed at least 15 years ago. Credit: Daniel Goodrich

By **Vera Chinese** vera.chinese@newsday.com [@VeraChinese](https://twitter.com/VeraChinese)

Updated June 14, 2023

Cesspools at a dozen Suffolk County parks and two dry wells at a vehicle maintenance garage that should have been removed at least 15 years ago will be closed by 2031, under a new agreement between the county and the federal government.

The county has agreed to pay a \$200,000 fine and spend more than \$7 million to remove the large capacity cesspools and wells to prevent them from polluting groundwater.

The county operated them in “long-standing” violation of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York Breon Pace and Regional Administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Lisa Garcia said in a joint statement Wednesday.

A consent judgment filed Wednesday acknowledges Suffolk failed to remove a total of 46 cesspools that don't remove nitrogen from human waste, and two motor vehicle waste disposal wells that receive fluid from vehicle repair and maintenance, in violation of the law.

The cesspools should have been shut down by 2005 and the motor vehicle wells by 2008, according to the EPA.

Deputy county executive Peter Scully said in a statement Suffolk was “pleased to have resolved these legacy issues.” County officials did not say why the cesspools and wells were still operating, and the EPA did not respond to questions about the issue.

The county agreed to close the cesspools and the wells with deadlines for each project between 2023 and 2031, and pay the \$200,000 penalty to avoid litigation.

The consent judgment primarily requires Suffolk County to remove cesspools at campground bathrooms and replace them with high-tech septic systems, and to replace recreational vehicle dump stations with new holding tanks. It also calls for closure of two motor vehicle wells at a Hauppauge police garage.

The agreement says improvements are needed at the following county parks: Blydenburgh; Cathedral Pines; Cedar Point; Indian Island; Montauk; Peconic Dunes; Sears Bellows; Munn's Pond; Shinnecock Marina; Southaven; West Hills; and West Sayville Golf Course.

"This agreement with Suffolk County is a major achievement that will help protect the drinking water of millions of Long Islanders from the harmful impacts of large capacity cesspools and waste disposal wells," Garcia said in a news release. "These types of underground injection wells can pollute groundwater and endanger public health and the environment."

The state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation reached a [similar agreement](#) with the EPA in 2016 that included a \$150,000 fine for 54 illegal cesspools at state parks. The consent decree came 14 years after a federal deadline to remove them.

Suffolk's consent decree received unanimous approval from the county legislature at its June 6 meeting.

"It's in the best interest of the environment, and we're more than happy to comply with that consent decree," said legislative presiding officer Kevin McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst).

Nutrient and chemical pollution of groundwater is a persistent issue for Long Island, which gets its drinking water from underground aquifers. Nitrogen pollution from untreated wastewater is a particular problem in Suffolk, where nearly three-quarters of properties lack sewer service and rely on outdated septic systems and cesspools that do not actively remove nitrogen before releasing human waste into the ground.

A public hearing has been set for June 21 on a plan to raise the Suffolk County sales tax by .125% to fund a countywide expansion of sewers and high-tech septic systems. The measure would require voter approval in a ballot referendum.

Kevin McAllister of the Sag Harbor nonprofit Defend H2O has pressed for removal of large cesspools at public parks for the past decade and said he was glad to see action on the issue.

"The sheer volume, when you consider a county or state park in the summer months at full capacity, that's a great deal of wastewater that's being released into essentially groundwater," he said.