

Bellone: County seeking \$50 million in economic development funds for cesspool replacement grants

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Suffolk County is seeking \$50 million dollars in NYS economic development grant funding to help replace failing cesspool systems in homes across the county.

The county submitted the grant application on behalf of Suffolk's 10 towns through the Long Island Regional Economic Development Council, County Executive Steve Bellone announced yesterday.

If approved by the state, the funding would provide partial grant incentives for the replacement of about 5,000 cesspools with advanced wastewater treatment systems. The new systems remove nitrogen from wastewater. Nitrogen pollution is the major contributor to the region's water quality problems.

Restoring and protecting water quality is crucial to the region's tourism-based economy, Bellone said.

"Long Island is the second most popular tourism destination in the state and our water quality is essential to this multi-billion dollar industry," Bellone said in a statement.

Tourism produces annual revenues of \$4.7 billion — including \$27.3 million in sales tax revenues — according to the county executive, citing the Trust for Public Land. Long Island draws more than 5 million visitors annually, with nearly a third of them visiting parks that include beaches.

If the county's consolidated funding application is approved, the \$50 million would be distributed equally among all participating towns, according to a press release issued by Bellone's office yesterday. The application is supported by all 10 towns and a diverse coalition of stakeholders including the Long Island Builders Institute, Citizens Campaign for the Environment, and The Nature Conservancy, Bellone said.

Bellone has aggressively pushed for individual advanced wastewater treatment systems to help address a water quality crisis that has led to repeated deadly algae blooms in local waterways. Some have contributed to massive fish kills in recent years.

More than 75 percent of the homes in Suffolk are not connected to a municipal sewage treatment plant. The county estimates that 360,000 homes use septic systems and cesspools which do not treat wastewater in any way and pollute groundwater and surface waters.

The county has begun permitting advanced wastewater treatment systems for individual residences. The state-of-the-art systems typically cost between \$15,000 and \$20,000 to install and the county has been working on various ways to help homeowners bear the cost — with the aim of incentivizing homeowners to replace their old cesspools.

Last month, Suffolk launched an innovative septic improvement program to provide grant funding to eligible homeowners to replace septic systems and cesspools. It makes available grants of up to \$10,000 to offset the cost of the new systems.

Homeowners may also qualify to finance the remaining cost of the systems over 15 years at a low 3-percent fixed interest rate, potentially providing the homeowner with no initial out-of-pocket costs and payments of only \$50 per month.