

Suffolk Mandate For Advanced Septic Systems For New Homes Takes Effect

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A new Suffolk County mandate to install expensive high-tech septic systems in most new homes and commercial properties goes into effect Thursday, with builders expressing concern about the costs on top of rising construction prices.

The Long Island Builders Institute, a trade association, urged county officials in a recent letter to delay the start of the program or help alleviate its costs for the next nine months to allow the economy to recover as the coronavirus pandemic subsides.

The association estimates the systems combined with rising land and lumber prices will raise the cost of a new home in Suffolk by between \$60,000 and \$90,000. The new septic systems cost about \$20,000 to install — double the amount for traditional systems — plus \$300 a year for maintenance, officials said.

"The pandemic has had a significant impact on new home construction," Mitchell Pally, CEO of the Builders Institute, told Newsday in an interview. "And that is having an impact on the ability of many low- and moderate-income people to afford new homes in Suffolk County," Pally said.

Suffolk County officials said they were considering ways to offset the septic system costs temporarily, with tactics including expansion of a county grant program for replacing outdated septic systems and cesspools in existing homes. But delaying the mandate's start date isn't possible because doing so likely would require new legislation, and the Suffolk County Legislature won't meet again until July 27.

MaryKate Guilfoyle, a spokeswoman for Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone, said the administration was "working cooperatively with legislators to identify a practical approach to address the concerns" raised by the builders association. Presiding Officer Robert Calarco (D-Patchogue) said "we need to try to figure out how we can help alleviate that pressure, at least over a short-term time frame."

Calarco continued: "Having said that, I don't think that it would be necessarily a good policy to just roll back the requirements that we have right now." The Suffolk County Legislature unanimously approved the mandate for most newly constructed and significantly renovated homes and commercial properties in October.

The measure, proposed by Bellone, aims to reduce nitrogen pollution that officials say has led to harmful algal blooms in local waterways. Bellone has called nitrogen pollution "public enemy No. 1."

Traditional septic systems generally cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000 to install. But they release at least triple the nitrogen as the advanced on-site wastewater treatment systems the county is mandating, according to data provided by the county.

The advanced systems use bacteria, oxygen and natural chemical reactions aided by blowers, calibrated mechanics and other technology to reduce nitrogen. The requirement represents the first step in the county's \$4 billion plan to phase out aging septic systems and cesspools, and replace them with high-

tech systems and sewer connections over a 50-year period. Many owners of new homes have to absorb the cost of the new septic systems themselves. The county has a grant program for existing homeowners to replace outdated systems, but not for owners of new homes, officials said.

The towns of Brookhaven, East Hampton, Shelter Island and Southampton already require low-nitrogen septic systems for some new construction. More than 1,000 such systems have been installed countywide with the aid of state, county and town grants, county officials said.

The mandate does not apply to homes located within sewer districts or to renovations that create fewer than five bedrooms and do not increase the building footprint. Suffolk Legis. Kevin McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst), the minority leader, said he would consider measures including the extension of the county grant program to owners of new homes, with limits on income and sale price.

"Some of the homeowners are scraping every nickel together to be able to buy these homes, whether new construction or an existing home, and we feel that they should be able to have some access to that funding," McCaffrey said in an interview. The county's new septic requirement comes as high demand for housing spurred by the pandemic drove up home prices in Nassau and Suffolk counties.

Suffolk's median home price surpassed \$500,000 for the first time in May, according to a recent report by OneKeyMLS, a property listing service. The cost of land in Suffolk has risen by about 25% in the past year, Pally said. Lumber costs are expected to raise construction costs by between \$35,000 and \$50,000 per home, Pally said.

Over the past year, softwood lumber prices rose by 154% and plywood prices jumped by 98%, according to a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report on producer prices in May. Pally estimates the new septic mandate will apply to about 200 to 300 homes built each year in western Suffolk County.

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