

Suffolk sales tax hike to build sewers could be on December ballot



Suffolk Presiding Officer Kevin McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst) said Wednesday that legislators "are working on reaching a consensus" on whether to hold a special election in December. Credit: Howard Schnapp

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Suffolk County legislators are considering holding a December special election on a measure to fund a sweeping wastewater expansion plan with a .125% sales tax increase after rejecting the initiative earlier this year.

The legislature has scheduled a special meeting at 9:30 a.m. Friday to potentially vote on setting the election and creating a countywide wastewater district to administer the plan. County officials say both are needed to move forward with Suffolk's \$4 billion Subwatersheds Wastewater initiative.

Legislative Presiding Officer Kevin McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst) said Wednesday that lawmakers "are working on reaching a consensus that will allow us to move forward."

"In anticipation of reaching an agreement, a special meeting is scheduled for this Friday," he said.

Nearly 75% of Suffolk properties are served by outdated septic systems that do not remove nitrogen from wastewater, according to county officials. Expanding wastewater treatment was a key goal of Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone, a Democrat who declared nitrogen "public enemy Number One" in 2014.

The proposed sales tax increase, which would require voter approval, would fund sewers and grants for septic upgrades for individual property owners.

Legislation that authorized the county to advance the sewer expansion cleared the state Capitol this year. But Republicans balked at the funding formula, saying most of the sales tax revenue would be used for individual high-tech septic systems rather than sewer construction.

Assemb. Fred Thiele (D-Sag Harbor), who along with state Sen. Monica Martinez (D-Brentwood) sponsored the initial state bill authorizing the measure, said he will work to amend its language when state lawmakers reconvene in January.

He said county legislators have asked that half of the new tax be allocated toward sewers and the other half toward upgrading private septic systems. Under the current formula, 75% would go to septic systems.

They have also asked that the existing .25% sales tax funded Suffolk County Drinking Water Protection Program be amended so that some of its funding goes toward septic systems. Currently none of that money goes toward septic systems.

Thiele said the end result will essentially be the same if the amendments are made.

“The funding for sewers, the funding for I/A [septic] systems is basically the same,” he said. “It’s just a little different as to which pot of money everything is coming from.”

Representatives for Bellone could not immediately be reached for comment.

The Republican-controlled county legislature voted along party lines in July to recess the measures, preventing the sales tax referendum from making the November general election ballot. Backers of the initiative said GOP lawmakers were trying to stall the sewer expansion plan for political reasons in a year all 18 legislative seats are up for election, an assertion McCaffrey denied.

“While it would have been preferable to have this on the ballot in November, we are delighted that legislators regrouped and will likely schedule it for December,” said Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the Farmingdale-based nonprofit Citizens Campaign for the Environment and an advocate of the plan. “Better late than never.”



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