

Suffolk unveils plans for 1,200 new high-tech septic systems next year

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Suffolk County officials are ramping up a plan to reduce nitrogen pollution in waterways by installing 1,200 high-tech septic systems next year, County Executive Steve Bellone announced Tuesday. Officials said they plan to more than double the number of alternative wastewater septic systems installed monthly under an existing grant program, Bellone told an audience of more than 100 people at a water quality summit at Stony Brook University.

The plan will “take our already aggressive efforts to a new level” and increase the average number of systems installed per month from 40 to 100, Bellone said. The plan expands a program created in 2017 to provide grants to homeowners who voluntarily replace aging cesspools and septic systems with new ones that produce less nitrogen.

The expansion will be funded using \$10 million in state money awarded earlier this year, county officials said. Officials said they also plan to encourage residents to replace their septic systems by designating the community with the most systems installed over six months as a Nitrogen Smart Community.

Nitrogen pollution, including from wastewater, has led to fish kills and algal blooms in Suffolk waters, said Christopher Gobler, chair of Stony Brook University’s Coastal Ecology School. “We need as many [septic] systems to get done as quickly as possible,” Gobler said.

Basil Seggos, commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, said the problems related to wastewater “are the most acute” in Suffolk, which relies on a sole source aquifer. “There are no other places in the state where you have this type of relationship between septic tanks and sustainability and viability,” Seggos said at the summit.

Seggos also announced Tuesday that the DEC installed a monitoring well in Freeport, the first of 25 planned wells to study groundwater across Long Island. Some experts have cautioned that replacing septic systems does not address other sources of contamination, such as fertilizer and storm water.

They also say the county has not proved water quality has improved in areas where the new septic systems have been installed. Deputy County Executive Peter Scully, whom Bellone has dubbed his

"water quality czar," countered that the systems "have proven themselves in other areas" of the country and in Suffolk, where they have performed above sanitary code requirements.

About half the new septic systems with provisional approval have met county standards of releasing 19 milligrams of nitrogen per liter, according to Suffolk health officials. The overall average for all such systems is 18.4 milligrams per liter, better than the level required by the county, health officials said in July.

Asked about criticism that only some of the systems appear to work, Scully said the data set is too small so far to determine their performance overall. Systems that don't comply with standards over a two-year monitoring period will not receive full approval. Officials estimate there are 380,000 cesspools and aging septic systems in Suffolk. Since the county began offering grants and loans to homeowners to offset the cost of installation of high-tech systems, 150 have been installed and 140 are pending installation.

Another 350 systems have been installed outside of the grant program, officials said. The systems cost an average of about \$20,000. Residents can receive grants of \$10,000 from the county and \$10,000 from the state. There are additional grants for residents with low to moderate incomes, along with town rebates in Southampton, East Hampton and Shelter Island, county officials said.

Replacement of outdated septic systems is a key element in a proposed \$4-billion Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan, which would fund sewer connections and new septic systems over a period of more than 50 years.

The new septic systems would be required in new construction and when older systems fail or when properties are sold. A funding source has not yet been determined. The county is seeking more resident participation to install more of these systems and will be doing community outreach, Scully said.

County Comptroller John M. Kennedy Jr., a Republican who is challenging Bellone in November, said if elected, he would focus his water quality efforts on containing storm water that leads to beach closures.

"Why are we in such a rush to continue to promote technology that's just not there?" Kennedy said. "It makes no sense to me."

Homeowners can apply for septic system funding here:

<http://www.reclaimourwater.info/>