

Sewer progress worth applause

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Then-Huntington Town Supervisor Chad Lupinacci, left, and Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone after signing a sewer pact Dec. 29, 2021. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

By The Editorial Board

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It has been a big couple of weeks for sewers.

We know, we know. That doesn't sound that exciting.

But sewers remain the backbone for a healthy ecosystem for Long Island water, for upgraded clean water infrastructure, and for improved economic development in communities across Suffolk County. So progress on expanding sewers is key.

Start with Huntington Station, where last month officials announced an agreement between the Town of Huntington and Suffolk County. Each will contribute \$22 million toward a "hub sewer infrastructure project" in Huntington Station that will extend through the Route 110 corridor and permit upgrades to other sewer infrastructure.

Add in Kings Park, where voters overwhelmingly approved a plan to extend the existing system to cover downtown businesses, homes and co-ops, using \$20 million in state funds.

And don't forget about Westhampton Beach, which received state and county grants totaling about \$3.5 million to improve the village's wastewater treatment plant.

All this comes as Suffolk embarks on its largest sewer expansion in decades, including plans to extend the reach of the Southwest Sewer District. Eventually, about 5,500 more homes will be hooked up through the Carlls River project in Babylon Town, the Forge River project in Mastic-Shirley, and further extensions in Patchogue. All told, the expansion will cost about \$400 million.

New sewer connections or improvements to existing systems remain critical to revitalizing several downtowns, adding housing, businesses, and more. But above all, this is an environmental win, as it means many residents will no longer have to rely on ineffective cesspools or septic tanks, which means cleaner ground and surface water for all of us.

The three new projects are part of the larger turning point in Suffolk's broader commitment to sewer expansion, which was long halted due to the corrupt and costly Southwest Sewer District scandals. Elected officials still should remember their county's checkered sewer history. As state and federal dollars flow, they must make sure the money is spent properly, that the sewers are connected in the most productive way, and that the corruption of the past doesn't seep into the present. Oversight is necessary.

Even when done right, none of this comes easily, as there's often opposition. The continued support of elected, business and civic leaders will be critical. That's particularly true in Huntington, which saw a changing of the guard since the sewer announcement was made. New Supervisor Ed Smyth should follow his predecessor's lead, and push the Huntington Station effort forward. Meanwhile, Smithtown Town Supervisor Edward Wehrheim and Westhampton Beach Mayor Maria Moore show what can happen when elected leaders embrace such change.

That shifting tide of thought could make an enormous difference, not only for the region's economic needs but for one of Long Island's most serious environmental concerns and, ultimately, the health and well-being of its residents.

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