

OPINION EDITORIALS

# It's time to raise money for clean water fight in Suffolk



There is a treatment system at Connetquot State Park Preserve. Credit: Newsday/Thomas A. Ferrara  
**By The Editorial Board** March 29, 2023

Many battles have been won in the fight to clean our nitrogen-spoiled waters, beginning with getting everyone on Long Island to agree that we have a problem.

There also is consensus on how to reduce the nitrogen that has fueled algal blooms, decimated shellfishing, weakened and destroyed marshlands, and depleted oxygen levels to the point they imperil fish: Do something about the 360,000 ineffective cesspools and septic tanks in Suffolk County that don't filter nitrogen out of our wastewater. That means sewers in areas where it makes sense to install or expand them and new individual treatment systems where sewers are not feasible.

What's been missing is an acceptable and viable proposal for the recurring funds needed to tackle this admittedly mammoth task. Until now.

A broad-based consortium of organized labor, building trades and environmentalists is pushing a proposal to put a referendum on the November ballot to allow Suffolk residents to vote for a sales tax increase of 1/8 cent to fund sewers and septic replacements. The Democratic-dominated State Senate and Assembly included the plan in their one-house budgets. All four Republican state senators from Suffolk have signed on. Gov. Kathy Hochul supported the creation of the fund in her proposal but did not include a funding stream. If she is serious about protecting and preserving water and the environment, she needs to get on board.

The proposed tax increase is a classic example of many small contributions adding up to something large. The hike would amount to 12 cents on a \$100 purchase but it would generate an estimated \$3.1 billion by 2060, nearly \$58 million in the first year alone. That money wouldn't be paid solely by Suffolk residents. About 20% is expected to come from purchases by tourists, who fuel a \$6.3 billion tourism industry heavily dependent on the region's waters. The money raised would be used as the local match needed to get grants from the federal and state governments, which have billions of dollars available for such infrastructure.

Importantly, the legislation stipulates that the funds can only be used to address the clean water infrastructure identified in the plan. In other words, there would be no raiding of this locked box, defusing a legitimate issue raised by opponents who cite the county government's history of doing that with other sewer funds. Objections to adding a tax on residents also are unfounded since they can choose to vote it down. But Suffolk has a history of supporting such measures — see the East End's Community Preservation Fund and various state environmental bonds, include the one last November that 64% of Suffolk residents voted to approve — all the more reason to let them weigh in on this one.

The fight for clean water is critical to Long Island's future. It's time to raise the money to wage the war.

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