

LONG ISLAND TOWNS

## Smithtown sewer project gets \$13 million in COVID-19 relief funds from Suffolk County



Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone announces funding for Smithtown sewer projects on Thursday. Credit: James Carbone

By **Nicholas Spangler**[nicholas.spangler@newsday.com](mailto:nicholas.spangler@newsday.com)[@spanglernewsday](https://twitter.com/spanglernewsday) Updated May 11, 2023

Smithtown was awarded \$13 million in grants from Suffolk County's wastewater infrastructure fund, with most of the money going toward construction of downtown sewers, county and town officials said Thursday.

A \$10 million grant will help fund the Smithtown Business District sewer project, and \$3 million will go toward [design and construction of sewers along Lake Avenue](#) in St. James.

"What wastewater infrastructure represents is water quality. It represents downtown community revitalization, it represents small businesses being able to thrive," said County Executive Steve Bellone, who was joined by more than a dozen local officials at a news conference in St. James' Celebrate Park.

The Smithtown projects are part of a bundle of large-scale public works projects the county is seeding with money from its \$125 million wastewater infrastructure fund, created in its 2022 operating budget with money from the American Rescue Plan Act, or COVID-19 stimulus package signed by President Joe Biden in 2021. Other projects include those in Kings Park, Mastic, Patchogue and Centereach.

While the sums announced Thursday were welcome news for Smithtown officials and business leaders, who have for years argued that sewers would reap environmental and economic dividends, considerable funding gaps remain.

Deputy County Executive Peter Scully at Thursday's gathering said the planned Smithtown sewer district, once estimated to cost \$50 million to \$60 million, is now estimated at \$90 million. That project will run a sewer line from Kings Park down Smithtown's Main Street, serving businesses and two shopping centers; it could also serve businesses on part of Route 111. The St. James project —which involves expanding a nearby sewage treatment plant and hooking up about 138 properties off Lake Avenue —is estimated at \$16.7 million, he said.

New York State has already committed \$20 million toward the Smithtown work, but county officials are seeking other sources of state and federal money to build those and other sewers, Scully said. They could also draw from multibillion dollar sales tax money under the Suffolk County Water Quality Restoration Act, if voters approve a ballot measure this fall.

Cobbling together funding sources serves a strategic purpose, Scully said: "We try to get the project as close as possible to shovel-ready, so we can make the argument to state and federal officials that this is a project that's ready to go."

In a statement, Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said he had "fought hard" to bring ARPA money to Long Island. "This funding will help fully revitalize Smithtown Business District, provide more economic development opportunities, and protect public health and the environment by stemming the tide of toxic nitrogen into our groundwater and waterways."

Smithtown sewer supporters have argued that adding them to downtown business districts will enable new or expanded commercial development and new housing such as second-floor apartments. Those uses are now constrained by the area's dependence on cesspools and septic systems, technology still used by three-quarters —or 360,000 —of the homes in the county.

"The time to do this is now," Smithtown Councilman Thomas Lohmann, who works on many of the town's public infrastructure programs, said in an interview before the event.

Adding sewers could benefit recently announced town initiatives like redevelopment of a languishing area near Smithtown's downtown Long Island Rail Road station for apartments, retail and offices. It could also benefit smaller-scale redevelopment elsewhere, Lohmann said. "We're trying to attract some of our younger folks to stay in the community, and this will allow property owners to beautify buildings, to increase square footage to allow additional revenue sources to come in for them as well as for the town."

Tim Small, president of civic group Smithtown United and co-chair of a sewer working group with Scully, said the sewer grants are a long-term investment for businesses in the downtown area. "I'm more optimistic today than ever before."

**By Nicholas Spangler**

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