

# On the East End, a sense of urgency over hi-tech septics and clean water

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Officials on Long Island's East End are moving aggressively to require the installation of advanced nitrogen-reducing septic systems, even as Suffolk County assesses the effectiveness of the technology in cleaning the region's surface waters. In January, the Town of East Hampton began mandating that advanced systems be installed in all new residential and commercial construction sites or where an existing structure is undergoing an expansion of at least 50 percent.

Southampton is requiring that they be installed in new residential construction or expansions of existing homes in designated areas near bays and streams. Farther to the west, Brookhaven Town has a similar rule, although one limited solely to new construction. The Shelter Island Town board will discuss in May a proposal to require the advanced systems in construction of all new homes larger than 1,500 square feet.

Advanced on-site wastewater treatment systems are key to Suffolk County's ambitious plan to reduce the nitrogen pollution that leads to harmful algal blooms, loss of shellfish stocks, degraded wetlands and lower oxygen levels in Long Island's bays and rivers and in Long Island Sound. But rather than requiring their installation, the county has so far relied on government grants and other financial incentives to persuade homeowners to abandon the cesspools and septic systems that predominate in the region. The advanced systems have an average price of nearly \$20,000, at least twice the cost of traditional waste-disposal systems, which do little to limit nitrogen.

County officials are considering whether installation of the systems would be required in certain circumstances, but are still in discussions with environmentalists, builders and local governments. Recent county-ordered tests show that just two of the five systems approved by Suffolk have met the threshold county officials set for reducing nitrogen, a review by Newsday/News 12 has found.

The local officials say that their support for a mandate is as much about pushing the county to act as it is about getting residents to participate programs to restore the environment. "We wanted to frankly push the county and demonstrate that our community valued this as an issue and solution," said Larry Cantwell, who was the supervisor in East Hampton when the mandate was enacted last year and the year before when a stream of local tax revenue was dedicated to the effort. "We wanted more done.

We wanted the state to put up more money. We wanted the county to lead and we wanted to be part of that leadership.” After months of meetings with environmental groups, contractors and builders, Cantwell said, “we were convinced these systems are effective and work and are a solution to nitrogen and groundwater,” he said.

His successor, Peter Van Scoyoc, said Tuesday that the town remains committed to the effort. “While the efficacy of such systems is still being tested, and may vary,” he said, in a statement, “all efforts to reduce the nitrogen pollution that threatens our drinking water and the health of marine and freshwater ecosystems are important.” In most places, the region’s problem with nitrogen does not affect drinking water. On Shelter Island, though, water is drawn from one, small underground source and concentrations of the element are a concern.

“We are more aware of the fragility of our aquifer,” Town Supervisor Gary Gerth said. “We really want to be a little more aggressive.” Deputy County Executive Peter Scully said the decisions made by local officials concerning the advanced systems reflects a sense of necessary urgency.

“Historically, town and village governments have not involved themselves in regulating wastewater, but elected officials realize this is a significant environmental and economic issue and that the status quo is not sustainable,” said Scully, Suffolk’s water czar. “They feel compelled to act.” Rebates are available for up to \$16,000 in East Hampton and up to \$15,000 in Shelter Island and Southampton to replace existing systems with nitrogen-reducing technology, paid for through a tax on real estate transactions that was approved by voters in November of 2016.

Those funds are in addition to a Suffolk grant of up to \$11,000, and a loan program, managed by Community Development Corp. of Long Island, of another \$10,000 for qualified homeowners. Still, some local officials have urged caution, noting the potential burden on homeowners of the added costs of the advanced systems.

Southampton Supervisor Jay Schneiderman said that is why the town opted to limit the mandate to certain areas near a body of water. “We wanted time for the kinks to be worked out,” he said in an interview in December. The struggles of some systems to meet the county’s nitrogen-reduction standard have justified that caution, he said in an interview last week. “If they’re not achieving the stated goal, then we should only be advancing the systems that meet that goal,” he said.

“We’ve lost a lot of young people to the cost of living here. If we’re going to do that, we have to make sure it achieves the goals we want,” he added. He noted the systems were costly, so the town was deliberate in drawing boundaries. “Before spending billions, let’s take it a little slow,” he said. “Let’s try it out, put them where it makes the most sense.”

John Bouvier, a Southampton councilman and liaison to the town water-quality program, said he is drafting a mandate that would cover the entire town and hopes to have it up for review by the town board in the next two months. He said hearing about the results of the county tests gives him pause. “It’s problematic a little bit, now that I hear test results,” he said, adding he wants to review the results personally. “I fully expect to see the systems come through the process with greater percentage reduction [of nitrogen] in the future.”

Other towns have decided to wait for more study by the county.

Southold Supervisor Scott Russell said the town is waiting for a county map of at-risk water bodies, due out this summer, to identify highly sensitive areas. Given their cost, he didn't expect there to be a townwide requirement for installation of the systems. "Let's face it, this is an expensive proposition. There will not be enough money available anytime soon. So money we do spend we want to make sure there's the biggest bang for the buck," Russell said. "The science needs to guide the decision-making and the science isn't completed."

The Long Island Builders Institute is opposed to East Hampton's townwide mandate, but supports Southampton and Brookhaven's more geographically focused approach. "We support a phased-in approach to see how this is going to work," said Mitchell Pally, CEO of the institute, Long Island's largest home-building group.