

Suffolk lawmakers approve nearly \$400 million in new sewer projects

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By **Rachelle Blidner**

rachelle.blidner@newsday.com

[@rachelleblidner](https://twitter.com/rachelleblidner)

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The Forge River is seen from Montauk Highway in Mastic in January 2016. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

Two long-awaited sewer projects cleared their final legislative hurdles Tuesday as Suffolk County lawmakers approved bills that will allow the largest Suffolk sewer expansion in decades to move forward, County Executive Steve Bellone's office announced.

The Carlls River project in Babylon Town and the Forge River project in Mastic-Shirley are expected to break ground later this month, and will connect more than 4,220 properties to sewer service, Bellone's office said.

The projects, approved by voter referendum in 2019, are part of the Suffolk County Coastal Resiliency Initiative that ultimately will connect more than 5,500 homes to sewer service.

The legislation approved Tuesday enables Suffolk County to accept more than \$230 million in federal funding that received final approval from the Federal Emergency Management Agency last week, officials said.

"Today marks an historic day for water quality here in Suffolk County as we finally push these long-awaited sewer projects across the finish line," Bellone said in a statement Tuesday night.

"These projects are a major victory for Long Islanders and a significant step forward in our ongoing efforts to ensure that future generations will enjoy the bays, harbor and beaches that make Suffolk County special," Bellone said.

"This is the beginning of one of the largest infrastructure improvements in the county," said Legis. Jason Richberg (D-West Babylon), whose district is set to get sewers through the Carlls River project.

The sewer projects, which will cost a total of \$383 million, are designed to improve water quality by removing outdated septic systems and cesspools that contribute to nitrogen pollution in local waterways.

About 75% of Suffolk homes, or about 360,000, are not connected to sewers, county officials have said.

The legislation approved Tuesday will release funding for the Carlls River and Forge River projects and allow officials to award construction contracts, officials said.

County sewer projects had been in jeopardy earlier this year because of cost increases.

But an influx of federal pandemic aid strengthened county finances, allowing Suffolk to cover funding gaps for the Forge River project and connect nearly 1,500 properties in the Southwest Sewer District to service.

The Forge River project will connect 1,889 homes and 150 businesses through a new sewer district at an expected cost of \$225.7 million, county officials said.

The county will contribute \$42 million of the cost as part of a \$100 million sewer package announced by Bellone on Earth Day in April.

Property owners with sewer hookups will pay an average of \$470 a year in sewer taxes and maintenance costs to the Forge River district, officials said.

The \$157-million Carlls River project will extend the Southwest Sewer District to connect 2,184 homes in North Babylon, West Babylon, Deer Park, Wyandanch and Wheatley Heights.

Property owners will pay an expected \$532 a year, county officials said.

Construction on both projects will continue through 2024.

U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), who helped secure federal funding for the projects, said the "county's lack of modern sewer infrastructure" allows for pollution of waterways and "threatens public health and sustainable growth."

County officials are putting those funds "to good use by modernizing Suffolk's sewer system," Schumer said.

County officials, environmentalists, business groups and labor leaders said Tuesday the Carlls River and Forge River projects would improve water quality, protect water infrastructure against worsening storms and create jobs.

"This major achievement is both a significant benefit for our environment and economic development and one which will change the nature of our county in a positive manner," said Mitch Pally, chief executive of the Long Island Builders Institute.

The sewer projects approved Tuesday were part of a long-standing effort by Bellone to combat nitrogen pollution, which he has called "public enemy No. 1."

Bellone, a Democrat, has blamed such pollution for algal blooms, fish kills and other water quality issues.

Suffolk County began planning the coastal resiliency initiative, aimed at bolstering coastal areas against storms, in 2015.

After Superstorm Sandy in 2012, the county won federal grants to help rebuild communities and reduce future storm damage.

Officials said replacing cesspools and septic systems in low-lying South Shore areas would reduce nitrogen pollution, bolstering wetlands that protect coastlines.

Presiding Officer Robert Calarco (D-Patchogue) said officials also were also working to extend sewers to Patchogue Village. The project is another piece of the coastal resiliency initiative.

Also Tuesday, legislators approved resolutions to amend Bellone's proposed 2022-2024 capital budget.

The \$1.14-billion budget, filed July 30, includes funding for farmland preservation, creation of a police body-worn camera program and new sewer infrastructure.

The legislature amended 30 capital programs and created or added seven others, the legislature's Budget Review Office said.

One added program will provide \$3 million to the county Board of Elections to expand early voting to 26 locations, as required by New York State.

Early voting begins Oct. 23.

Bellone spokesman Derek Poppe said the administration was reviewing the capital budget amendments.

Also Tuesday:

- The legislature approved a measure by Legis. Kara Hahn (D-Setauket) to study conversion of vacant county park land into community or pollinator gardens.
- Legislators approved a measure, sponsored by Legis. Tom Cilmi (R-Bay Shore) and Legis. Bridget Fleming (D-Noyac), that would require officials to use any budget surpluses to repay pension debt in 2021 and 2022. Prepaying all amortized pension obligations would save the county \$14 million through 2033, according to a copy of the resolution.
- Legislators also voted to establish a county beekeeper registry for residents to contact to help remove hives, and to designate July 16 as Harry Chapin Day to honor the late singer-songwriter who founded Long Island Cares Inc.