

Suffolk sewer expansion plan 'sinking quickly'

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Environmentalists, labor unions and building trade groups representatives rally outside the county center in Riverhead on Wednesday for the chance to vote on a sales tax increase to fund wastewater treatment. Credit:

John Roca

By Vera Chinese vera.chinese@newsday.com [@VeraChinese](https://twitter.com/VeraChinese) Updated June 22, 2023

A major expansion plan for wastewater treatment in Suffolk County has a difficult and narrow path to advance to voters in November after Republican county legislators said this week they will not support it without changes.

Members of the legislature, where Republicans hold a majority, voted largely along party lines at their general meeting in Riverhead Wednesday night to stall proposals to consolidate the county's 27 sewer districts and advance a ballot referendum on a .125% sales tax increase to help fund the expansion.

Representatives of County Executive Steve Bellone say both measures are needed to fund and implement the county Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan, a 50-year, \$4 billion effort to reverse nitrogen pollution in Suffolk's ground and surface waters. Bellone, a Democrat who had made this one of his major initiatives, is term-limited in December after 12 years in office.

Although both measures cleared the state Legislature earlier this year, county lawmakers voted 10-6 to send them back to committees.

Legislative Presiding Officer Kevin McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst) said Thursday it was unlikely the referendum measure would be approved before an Aug. 4 deadline to put it on the November ballot.

“I don't see all those pieces coming together prior to the deadlines that we have to meet,” McCaffrey said.

He said the main issue was that 75% of the money raised by the tax increase would have been allocated to individual septic systems rather than expanding sewer infrastructure.

Adjusting that formula would require changes made to state legislation that authorized the plan.

Assemb. Fred Thiele, a Democrat from Sag Harbor who sponsored the bill, said it's too late for that. The legislative session ended this week.

“This is a discussion that should have happened weeks, if not months ago,” Thiele said.

The tax increase had been expected to generate \$3.1 billion between 2024 and 2060 to fund sewer expansions and grants for high-tech septic systems. Nearly three-quarters of Suffolk properties have outdated cesspools that do not remove nitrogen before releasing it into the ground.

State law does not require a referendum for the tax hike, Thiele said, but environmental initiatives in Suffolk County have traditionally gone before voters and received broad support.

Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the Farmingdale-based environmental nonprofit Citizens Campaign for the Environment, lobbied for state approval of the measures and was disappointed to see them stalled by county lawmakers.

“This initiative is sinking quickly and only the county legislature can throw out the life raft,” she said. “They just have to decide to do it.”

Bellone did not respond to a request for comment. Deputy County Executive Peter Scully sounded optimistic the administration could convince legislators to support the plan.

“It was encouraging that all but one of the 47 people who testified [Wednesday night] spoke in favor of the plan and urged the legislature to move forward,” Scully said in a statement. “We look forward to providing additional information to address legislators’ concerns in order to move this historic plan forward.”



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