

Suffolk set to break ground on Carlls River sewer project in Babylon

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Denise Leary, president of the Belmont Lake Civic Association in North Babylon, said the start of the Carlls River sewer project has been, "a long time coming." Credit: Chris Ware

Suffolk officials said they expect to break ground this month on the \$157 million Carlls River sewer project in Babylon Town, part of the largest sewer expansion in the county in decades.

The Carlls River project will connect more than 2,180 properties in North Babylon, Wyandanch, Wheatley Heights and Deer Park to sewers by September 2024.

Connections will begin this fall with 477 homes in North Babylon, officials said.

The project, approved by voter referendum in 2019, aims to improve water quality by removing outdated septic systems and cesspools that officials say contribute to nitrogen pollution in local waterways.

"This project will not only help reduce pollution to our bays, but it will also protect valuable coastal wetlands which are critically important to the economic and environmental health of our region," Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said in a statement.

Suffolk County Legis. Jason Richberg (D-West Babylon), whose district, and his home, will get sewers in upcoming phases of the project, said of the impending groundbreaking:

"It's one of those things where [you're told] Christmas is coming, Christmas is coming, Christmas is coming. And now it's the year," Richberg said.

Denise Leary, president of the Belmont Lake Civic Association in North Babylon, said, "It's a long time coming. It should have happened years ago — not just for our homes but for the environment of Long Island."

The Carlls River project is part of an effort to connect more than 5,500 properties to sewers, including through a new Forge River sewer district in the Mastic-Shirley area, and connecting homes in the Southwest Sewer District with service.

The fate of all these projects, which are part of the Suffolk County Coastal Resiliency Initiative, appeared in jeopardy this spring as estimated costs rose from \$388 million to \$405 million after the county had received bid proposals.

Officials said they were able to move forward after an influx of federal pandemic aid strengthened county finances.

The federal money will be used to cover funding gaps for the Forge River and Southwest sewer connection projects.

The Forge River and Carlls River projects got an additional boost last Thursday, when federal officials approved \$232 million to help fund them, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's office said.

The funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency has been in the county resiliency initiative's budget since 2015, but could not be released without approval of the White House Office of Management and Budget, officials said. Schumer's office said it expects to secure another \$11 million for the project.

Release of funds will allow Suffolk to award construction contracts and keep to its timelines, Schumer's office said.

More than 360,000 homes in Suffolk — about 75% — are not connected to sewers, according to county officials.

Officials abandoned plans to sewer much of the county after scandals, cost overruns, mismanagement and corruption during construction of the Southwest Sewer District in the 1970s.

John Tanacredi, executive director of the Center for Environmental Research and Coastal Oceans Monitoring at Molloy College, said the lack of sewers on the South Shore has been an issue for years.

Sewers are more effective than traditional septic systems because they allow wastewater to be managed at treatment plants, which are monitored by the state and thus properly maintained and operated, Tanacredi said.

The Carlls River project, initially slated to cost \$140 million, will be funded entirely by state and federal grants, most of which came from resiliency funding following Superstorm Sandy, officials said.

Residents with hookups will pay an average of \$532 a year in sewer taxes and maintenance costs, county officials said.

Residents who aren't hooked up also will have to pay sewer taxes, although county officials did not provide an estimate of the costs.

Property owners who consent to have their homes connected during construction of the project won't be charged for the cost, which averages about \$16,900 per residence, officials said.

Contractors, who will excavate parts of properties to install pipes and remove existing septic systems, will have to restore properties when the sewer work is complete, Suffolk County officials said.

To be eligible for the first phase of the Carlls River project, North Babylon property owners must complete forms that are being mailed to their homes and get them notarized by Oct. 29.

The forms can be returned to the Carlls River Watershed Sewer Project, 110-2, C/O Suffolk County Division of Real Estate 2nd Floor, H. Lee Dennison Building, 100 Veterans Memorial Highway, PO Box 6100, Hauppauge, NY 11788.

Residents also can get forms notarized at the Town of Babylon Phelps Lane Annex on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., beginning Oct. 12.