

Suffolk sales tax election for sewers scrapped after legislative talks collapse

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An advanced septic system that removes nitrogen from water is installed at a home in 2018. Suffolk legislators on Thursday failed to reach an agreement to put a sales tax plan to fund sewer upgrades on a ballot this year. Credit: Randee Daddona

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An agreement to hold a December special election on a sales tax increase to fund a major Suffolk County wastewater treatment expansion collapsed Thursday after the county legislature's presiding officer failed to get enough votes to move it forward.

As a result, the legislature canceled a meeting Friday to consider setting the election and creating a countywide wastewater district to administer the initiative. County officials have said both are needed to move forward with Suffolk's \$4 billion Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan to upgrade sewers and reverse decades of nitrogen pollution.

Legislative Presiding Officer Kevin McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst), who on Wednesday said legislators were working toward an agreement, said he learned Thursday the Republican majority caucus would not support the special election. He said legislators told him they wanted stronger commitments from lawmakers in Albany and Gov. Kathy Hochul to change the plan's funding formula that cleared the state Capitol this year.

"We want to build a little more consensus to make sure that we have all the commitments that we need," McCaffrey said. "I feel confident that we do [have state support] in my conversations with them."

Michael Murphy, a spokesman for the state Senate Democratic majority, said they did not receive a formal request for a commitment but would be willing to work with legislators to amend the state bill.

Representatives for Hochul and Assembly leadership did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Assemb. Fred Thiele (D-Sag Harbor) and state Sen. Monica Martinez (D-Brentwood), who sponsored the state bill, had already pledged to amend its language when state lawmakers reconvene in January.

A spokeswoman for County Executive Steve Bellone, a term-limited Democrat leaving office at the end of the year, said his administration will continue working with the legislature.

“Refusing to allow voters to choose on water quality imperils sewer projects in communities like Deer Park, Wyandanch, Oakdale and Mastic Beach and in downtowns like Smithtown, Port Jefferson Station and Selden,” spokeswoman Marykate Guilfoyle said in a statement.

It's the second time this year that Republican county legislators balked at putting the initiative on a ballot. The proposed .125% sales tax increase would fund sewers and grants for septic upgrades for individual property owners. Nearly 75% of Suffolk properties are served by outdated septic systems that do not remove nitrogen from wastewater, according to county officials.

In July, legislators declined to advance the plan in time for the November general election ballot, saying most of the sales tax revenue would be used for individual high-tech septic systems rather than sewer construction.

Backers of the initiative said GOP lawmakers were stalling for political reasons in a year when all 18 legislative seats are up for election, an assertion McCaffrey strongly denied.

The six members of the legislature's Democratic caucus have pledged support. The bills need 10 votes to move forward, meaning McCaffrey would need to persuade three of the GOP's 10 legislators to sign on.

“I remain optimistic that we're going to be able to get this done,” McCaffrey said.

Legis. Leslie Kennedy (R-Smithtown) on Friday said while she is in favor of water quality improvement, she did not feel comfortable supporting the measure until the national economy improves.

“It's not the time to make taxing and financial decisions, it's just not,” she said. “We can hold off for a few months.”