

# Clean water plan deserves a vote

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By The Editorial Board

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Politics, it is said, is not for the faint of heart. That certainly was the case last week when it seemed a deal had been made to finally move forward on a Suffolk County referendum to raise money for sewers and high-tech septic systems — only to have the deal collapse 24 hours later.

The reasons for the whiplash-inducing chain of events are still unclear. Legislative Presiding Officer Kevin McCaffrey seemed to have reached an agreement with environmentalists and labor, business and county officials that would let Suffolk take a giant and badly needed step toward cleaner water. McCaffrey said he had the votes in the legislature to make it happen — and then he didn't. It was an echo of July, when lawmakers also declined to advance the proposal.

Exactly what happened to derail the new agreement — power politics, petty politics, lingering concerns about the funding and timing — is almost beside the point now. What's important is what happens next. The referendum, thankfully, is not dead and we are hard-pressed to think of another issue about which there is so much apparent agreement from all quarters and yet such difficulty getting it done.

A refresher: The referendum would increase Suffolk's sales tax by one-eighth of a percent, which would generate an estimated \$3.1 billion through 2060 to expand sewers and offer grants to homeowners seeking to replace inefficient septic systems with state-of-the-art models. It also would extend to 2060 an existing 0.25% sales tax for drinking water protection, some of which is for sewers. The rub for some county legislators was the money partition: They wanted an explicit 50-50 split for sewers and septic systems for both funds. The timing is critical: Any sewer money raised can be leveraged to tap generous funding for sewers in the federal infrastructure bill and Inflation Reduction Act.

McCaffrey says he wants to get this done. We take him at his word. He says he's continuing to work on tweaks with the sponsors of the state bill that enabled the referendum, Assemb. Fred Thiele and Sen. Monica Martinez. McCaffrey also says he is in contact with Albany leadership and Gov. Kathy Hochul's office about the possibility of tweaking the legislation so the referendum can move forward.

Environmentalists, meanwhile, are exploring the possibility of a voter-initiated referendum which would mean collecting enough signatures from Suffolk voters to place the referendum directly on the ballot next year. That's an arduous process but one that would bypass whatever politics are derailing the conventional means of getting this done. If feasible, this should be pursued as well since it would accomplish what has been the goal all along — getting this issue before Suffolk's voters. Let them decide. It's their water, their county, their money, their future. Early polling shows the referendum is an easy winner.

No more excuses. Get it done.