

Suffolk lawmakers postpone vote on high-tech septic systems

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By **Rachelle Blidner** rachelle.blidner@newsday.com [@rachelleblidner](https://twitter.com/rachelleblidner)

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Suffolk County legislators on Wednesday postponed a vote on a water quality bill that would require residents who renovate their homes or build new ones to install high-tech septic systems, which cost \$20,000 on average. Many legislators expressed support for Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone's proposal, which aims to curb nitrogen pollution in local water bodies.

"I want to move forward as quickly as possible because we have a huge problem," Legis. Bridget Fleming (D-Noyac) said. But several Republicans said they wanted time to review the measure because of concerns about the cost of the systems to property owners doing home renovations.

"I want to clean up the bay but we can't ignore how this affects people," Legis. Steve Flotteron (R-Brightwaters) said. The measure would require innovative alternative, on-site wastewater treatment systems in new residential and commercial construction. The measure, which would go into effect next July, also would apply to residential renovations that increase the number of bedrooms. Legislators are expected to vote on the bill on Oct. 6.

Suffolk officials are still reviewing the IA systems for certification that they meet standards over two years. Of eight systems with provisional approval, two are not meeting nitrogen threshold limits, county data shows. IA systems emit about a third of the nitrogen of traditional septic systems. However, the high-tech systems are allowed to release nearly double the nitrogen limit for wastewater treatment plants, county standards show.

The sanitary code proposal comes five years after Bellone declared nitrogen pollution "public water enemy No. 1" for causing algal blooms that can degrade waterway ecosystems. About 75% of Suffolk is unsewered, and 380,000 homes and businesses use cesspools or outdated septic systems, officials said.

Wastewater is the leading source of nitrogen pollution in many Long Island waterways, including in Nassau, which is mostly sewerred, studies show. Bellone's proposal is the first step in a \$4 billion subwatersheds wastewater plan to phase out aging septic systems and cesspools with high-tech septic systems and sewer connections over 50 years.

"This is incredibly important for protecting the health of residents and coastal ecosystems," Chris Gobler, a Stony Brook University scientist who has led research on nitrogen pollution, said at the

legislative meeting Wednesday. But a coalition of scientists and engineers say concerns about nitrogen pollution are overstated. And the Long Island Builders Institute says the bill doesn't do enough to solve the nitrogen problem. Several critics have questioned the potential cost to homeowners since the systems can be more than twice as costly as traditional set-ups.

Also, the high-tech systems cost about \$300 a year to maintain. Because they use electricity, operation can boost utility bills. County officials said they were working to secure grant funding for lower- to medium-income households.

Two distributors of the high-tech systems told the legislature Wednesday that the systems effectively reduce nitrogen pollution and don't cost much more than a typical septic system during new construction. "The price of these systems is a small price to pay for water quality," said Joe Densieski, of Wastewater Works Inc.

Mitch Pally, chief executive of the builders Institute, said connecting more homes to sewage treatment plants, such as those in developments with unused wastewater capacity, would be more effective than construction of more IAs. "I think they're going about it the wrong way," Pally said. "Let's do this so we take communities together, not do one house by house."

Also Wednesday, legislators approved freezing salaries of county management employees until 2022. The employees will receive any missed step increases or raises once they leave county employment.