

LONG ISLANDSUFFOLK

Land swap for Montauk wastewater treatment plant resisted



Tom Ruhle, left, and Richard Whalen, co-founders of the Coalition for Hither Woods, on Thursday look at a map where East Hampton officials have proposed a wastewater treatment facility on land that is currently Suffolk County parkland. Credit: John Roca

By Joe Werkmeisterjoe.werkmeister@newsday.com Updated January 12, 2023

Businesses and homes in densely populated downtown Montauk rely on an “archaic” method to discharge sewage, an escalating problem that threatens local water quality and public health, East Hampton's town supervisor said.

“It’s only marginally better than what the Romans were doing 10,000 years ago,” Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc said.

To solve the problem, East Hampton officials have proposed building a wastewater treatment facility on parkland they hope to acquire via a land swap with Suffolk County. The facility would replace outdated cesspools and traditional septic systems in an area prone to coastal flooding and at high risk for rising sea levels. Officials say the area lacks adequate space to install high-tech innovative/ alternative systems seen as a solution for most of Long Island.

The proposal, while in its infancy, faces mounting resistance from groups who refuse to accept trading any portion of Hither Woods Preserve for sewage treatment. Critics argue the facility would also spur additional development, a point the supervisor countered by saying zoning laws control development.

Acquiring the property would require a rare process known as parkland alienation, which would need approval from the county and state legislatures. The town proposes swapping Highland Meadows, an undeveloped 18.8-acre property on East Lake Drive near Lake Montauk, for the 14 acres adjacent to the Montauk Transfer Station.

“This is a problem that we’re going to have to deal with now or later,” the supervisor said. “And we think the time is now.”

Van Scoyoc said the parkland represents the best option after a “pretty exhaustive search” and he noted only about one acre would need to be cleared, allowing adjacent trails used by hikers and bikers to remain intact. County health department regulations require large buffers between sewage treatment plants and adjacent properties, he added.

Richard Whalen, an Amagansett attorney, co-founded the Coalition for Hither Woods along with Tom Ruhle in the 1980s to help prevent a subdivision of the woods, which at the time included privately-owned land. They succeeded and the group went dormant in the ensuing years.

Until now.

With the backing of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society, Group for the East End and several other organizations, the coalition reemerged this month with a campaign against the sewer facility.

“Bottom line is you’re taking a chunk out of preserved woodland,” Whalen told Newsday.

Group for the East End has fought for conservation on the East End for five decades. The group’s president, Robert DeLuca, said alienation of parkland is “generally a hard no for us.”

With limited space on the East End, DeLuca said he worries that officials will bargain away preserved land for other needs.

“We think we have to stand early against that kind of thing or it’s going to pop up everywhere,” he said.

Richard Amper, executive director of the pine barrens society, said the aquifer beneath downtown Montauk is not a water supply source for residents. The Hither Woods property, however, “does possess significant water supply value,” he said.

County and state officials have largely reserved opining on the facility and land swap, saying they need to see a full environmental review completed first under the State Environmental Quality Review Act.

County Legis. Bridget Fleming (D-Noyac) said the outdated septic systems in Montauk can’t be sustained, but she said it is too early to take a position on the proposed land swap. Assemb. Fred Thiele (D-Sag Harbor) said he wants to see an analysis of alternative locations and why the parkland is the best option.

State Sen. Anthony Palumbo (R-New Suffolk) said he has been in contact with Thiele’s office and they both “feel strongly that the town needs to fully complete the SEQRA process before we will consider any legislation on their behalf.”



By Joe Werkmeister

joe.werkmeister@newsday.com

Joe Werkmeister covers the towns of Southampton, East Hampton and Shelter Island. He is a graduate of St. Bonaventure University and previously worked as the editor of two North Fork community newspapers.