

LONG ISLAND[POLITICS](#)

Suffolk sewer upgrade plan includes tax hike



Legislation at the state Capitol would allow Suffolk County to put a 1/8-cent sales tax increase on the November ballot to help pay for wastewater treatment and improve water quality. Credit: Randee Daddona
By Vera Chinesevera.chinese@newsday.com[@VeraChinese](https://www.instagram.com/VeraChinese) Updated March 28, 2023

A bipartisan coalition of state lawmakers, environmentalists, construction groups and labor union representatives is pushing in the final days of New York State budget negotiations for a plan to fund a dramatic expansion of sewers and high-tech septic systems in Suffolk County.

The groups, which often find themselves on opposite sides of issues, are backing language in state Senate and Assembly budget bills that would allow a referendum on the November ballot for county voters to consider a 1/8-cent sales tax increase.

It's unclear if the proposal will make it into the final fiscal 2023 budget that Gov. Kathy Hochul and state lawmakers are negotiating as the April 1 deadline for a new budget approaches.

If it does, the Republican-controlled Suffolk County Legislature would need to decide whether to put the tax hike on the November ballot.

What to know

- **Legislation at the state Capitol** would allow Suffolk County to ask voters to consider a 1/8-cent sales tax increase to help pay for a major expansion of sewers and high-tech septic systems wastewater treatment.

- **If the legislation moves forward**, the Suffolk County Legislature would need to decide whether to put the tax hike on the November ballot.
- **Advocates say the plan** would provide a stable revenue source to fund comprehensive wastewater treatment and reverse decades of nitrogen pollution in Suffolk.

Advocates say the ambitious plan would provide a stable revenue source to fund comprehensive wastewater treatment and reverse decades of nitrogen pollution in Suffolk.

Nearly 75% of Suffolk homes rely on traditional septic systems or cesspools that don't reduce nitrogen concentrations. Such systems account for 63.6% of the nitrogen that reaches the groundwater, according to the county's Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan adopted in 2020.

The proposed tax hike would help fund construction of new sewers in areas where they'd be appropriate and install high-tech septic systems at homes and businesses.

The county projects the increase could generate \$57.8 million in its first year and a total of \$3.1 billion between 2024 and 2060. It would be used as a local match to secure future federal and state grants.

But the plan hinges on voters supporting a tax hike in an uncertain economy.

A 2019 report from the New York State Association of Counties found that Suffolk residents pay the highest per capita sales tax in the state, with the average resident paying \$984 per year.

There's also the 0.25% sales tax that funds Suffolk's Drinking Water Protection Program, used for environmental purposes such as stabilizing sewer taxes and open space preservation.

The proposed Assembly and Senate legislation would extend that tax until 2060. It is set to sunset in 2030.

Like the House and Assembly bills, Hochul's budget proposal supports creating a countywide wastewater district to administer the sewer expansion program.

Hochul's bill does not include authorization for a sales tax increase referendum.

Hochul spokeswoman Katy Zielinski declined to comment on the issue directly.

Zielinski said Hochul's budget "makes transformative investments to make New York more affordable, more livable and safer, and she looks forward to working with the legislature on a final budget that meets the needs of all New Yorkers."

Advocates say they hope the sales tax language makes it into the final state budget.

They say the plans would begin to reverse the decline of Suffolk's surface waters within five to 10 years and represent a long-term solution to returning them to a pristine state.

"It is well established that Suffolk County is facing a water quality crisis, and voters should get the opportunity to decide if they want to invest in the infrastructure needed to restore this resource, which is vital to public health, the economy and to property values," Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said.

Long Island Contractors' Association executive director Marc Herbst said a large-scale expansion of sewers would create jobs for ironworkers, plumbers and others.

"If we don't address the nitrates in the water, this is not going to be the place that we grew up with," Herbst added.

Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the nonprofit Citizens Campaign for the Environment, based in Farmingdale, said builders and environmentalists have found rare common ground, as they have on offshore wind farms.

"Wind and water have brought together these diverse stakeholders," Esposito said.

Legis. Kevin McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst), presiding officer of the county legislature, did not return multiple calls seeking comment.

At least one legislator, Rob Trotta (R-Fort Salonga), has vowed to oppose it, citing in part the county's previous diversion of sewer funds.

"They've already raided one fund," Trotta said. "Are they going to raid another?"

The county diverted \$200 million of sewer sales tax revenue into the general fund between 2011 and 2017. The nonprofit Long Island Pine Barrens Society and others filed three lawsuits seeking repayment, including one pending in state Supreme Court.

Suffolk County deputy county executive Peter Scully said the new legislation stipulates the money can only be used for its intended purposes.

There's been pushback on previous proposals to fund sewer upgrades.

A 2020 feasibility study recommended a surcharge on water usage or a property tax increase to expand sewers and upgrade septic systems.

The water surcharge faced opposition from state lawmakers and the Suffolk County Water Authority because nitrogen is not a widespread threat in public drinking supply wells.

The property tax increase went nowhere because it would have pierced the state's 2% tax increase cap, Scully said.



By [Vera Chinese](#)

vera.chinese@newsday.com [@VeraChinese](#)

Vera Chinese covers Suffolk County government and politics. She joined Newsday in 2017 after working as an editor for the East End lifestyle publication northforker and a general assignment reporter for the New York Daily News.