

Suffolk sales tax hike for sewers could need another trip through Albany

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A wastewater treatment expansion plan that cleared the state Capitol earlier this year was shelved by Suffolk lawmakers. Credit: Yeong-Ung Yang

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A plan that includes a sales tax hike for a massive expansion of wastewater treatment in Suffolk County will need to travel through Albany again after county legislators shelved the most recent proposal.

The Republican-controlled legislature on Tuesday voted 10-7 along party lines to essentially prevent the tax increase from appearing on the November ballot, citing issues with its funding formula. The plan was approved by state lawmakers earlier this year, and any changes would require new legislation or tweaks to the existing measure, along with the governor's signature.

Suffolk lawmakers could then schedule a special election or hold a referendum in the November 2024 general election.

Assemb. Fred Thiele (D-Sag Harbor), one of the original bill's sponsors, said he is willing to work on a new proposal if Republican legislators present one. He said the bill that made it through Albany was crafted with consensus from the scientific and business communities, and the next one will need to have the same.

"I think the primary responsibility going forward is on those who took a bold and well-thought-out initiative and tossed it in the garbage can," Thiele said. "We know what you don't like. Tell us what you do like."

The money would have provided a stable funding source for a widespread expansion of sewers and grants to upgrade hundreds of thousands of Suffolk homes with high-tech, nitrogen-reducing septic systems. About 360,000 properties are without wastewater treatment, according to county officials.

Legis. Kevin McCaffrey, presiding officer of the Suffolk legislature, said he will find a solution his caucus, environmentalists, union leaders and other stakeholders can agree on.

"I'm willing to compromise on what I think it should be and I'm hoping that others are as well," McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst) said. "I think progress is being made. And we're going to continue to make progress."

McCaffrey said he is in favor of asking voters to raise the county's sales tax by .125% to fund wastewater treatment, a key part of the previous initiative. The GOP's main complaint was that 75% of the money raised through the tax would be reserved for individual septic systems rather than sewers.

The increase would bring Suffolk's 8.653% sales tax to 8.778% and was expected to generate \$3.1 billion between now and 2060.

A new plan also would need the support of whoever succeeds County Executive Steve Bellone, a Democrat who advocated for the previous proposal. Bellone is term-limited in December after 12 years.

Both candidates for Suffolk County executive, Republican Ed Romaine and Democrat Dave Calone, have said they would support putting the issue to voters.

Romaine said in a social media post Wednesday that he would "lead the change in Albany to get the right language before the public for a referendum."

Calone attended a rally in favor of the plan outside the legislature building Tuesday and issued a statement saying Republican legislators "put misguided politics over the future of Suffolk County" by shelving it.

Democrats said the GOP did not want an environmental initiative on the ballot in a year that includes all 18 legislature seats because it could bring out Democratic voters, an allegation McCaffrey denied.

Backers of the original plan have said delaying a vote means the county will miss the first opportunity to apply for funds made available by the \$4 billion state Environmental Bond Act and a trillion-dollar congressional infrastructure bill.

Adrienne Esposito, executive director of Farmingdale-based Citizens Campaign for the Environment, said sewers are not feasible for most properties in Suffolk because they can cost five times as much per parcel as individual high-tech septic systems.

"They took a state-of-the-art clean water plan and flushed it down the toilet," Esposito said. "Now we are waiting to see what their new idea is."