LI's green boost

Treatment plant, beaches among budget projects

BY EMILY C. DOOLEY
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The state's new $168 billion budget allocates funding toward a number of environmental initiatives on Long Island, including $5 million for the Sandy-damaged Bay Park Sewage Treatment Plant, $1.5 million for sewer improvements in Suffolk County and $7.6 million for storm restoration and beach renourishment in Point Lookout and Lido Beach.

Funding for research of nitrogen-removing septic systems, anti-Southern pine beetle efforts, programs to reduce pesticide use and lab facilities to test for drinking-water contaminants are also included in the overall spending plan.

Requiring large institutions to recycle food waste and an initiative to protect and enhance forest lands did not make it into the final version of the budget bills.

Basil Seggos, commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, said, though, the funding for projects on Long Island was encouraging in an "austerity budget year" when the state is facing a $4.4 billion deficit.

"The fact that so much was dedicated to the environment, it shows the commitment of the governor," Seggos said.

Many of the items — $2 million for the Central Pine Barrens Commission, $900,000 for the Long Island South Shore Estuary Reserve and $200,000 for the Peconic Estuary Program — were funded through the $300 million Environmental Protection Fund, or EPF, a fund in the overall budget created in 1993 dedicated to environmental initiatives.

"We're very pleased with the environmental allocation in the EPF," said Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the Farmingdale-based Citizens Campaign for the Environment. "Long Island got some critical funding for necessary projects."

The Bay Park Sewage Treatment Plant, which was knocked offline during the 2012 superstorm and is still operating mostly on generators, is slated to get $5 million in reappropriated funds for sewer connections, nitrogen-removal treatment and costs associated with Nassau County plans to connect Bay Park to an existing outfall pipe at Cedar Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant.

The East Rockaway plant has received more than $800 million in federal money for restoration and upgrades since Sandy. Connecting Bay Park to Cedar Creek is an integral part of county plans to divert effluent, which now flows into Reynolds Channel and has increased nitrogen loading in the Western Bays, damaging water quality.

"We're very grateful to the state for any help they can give," Nassau County Executive Laura Curran told Newsday.

The budget also includes funding for other high-profile antipollution efforts. In addition to $3 million for Suffolk County and Stony Brook University to research ways to reduce nitrogen flowing from cesspools and septic systems, Stony Brook's Center for Clean Water Technology will also get $1 million to research ways to remove from drinking water 1,4-dioxane, a probable carcinogen that is unregulated and found in trace amounts throughout Long Island's groundwater. The facility will also get $500,000 for new laboratory facilities to test for perfluorinated compounds, another unregulated contaminant found locally.

The final budget also includes $250,000 to study the feasibility of building a storm-surge barrier along the South Shore.

"A sea gate study is absolutely critical if we want to protect our homes and families from another superstorm Sandy," Assemb. Christine Pellegrino (D-West Islip) said in a news release. "Too many lives, businesses and properties are at stake."

The Long Island Commission for Aquifer Protection received $200,000 to maintain its online program WaterTraq, which provides water quality testing data, as well as a reappropriation of $250,000 authorized in last year's budget but not appropriated.

"When people learn about WaterTraq, they tend to use it to educate themselves about groundwater threats and how water suppliers address these threats and supply safe drinking water," said LICAP vice chairman Jeffrey W. Szabo, who is also CEO of the Suffolk County Water Authority. "And when people educate themselves on these important issues, it bodes well for the long-term protection of our water supply."

MORE INSIDE Land buy lacks funds A11

Glen Cove to double borrowing to clean wells

BY DAVID OLSON
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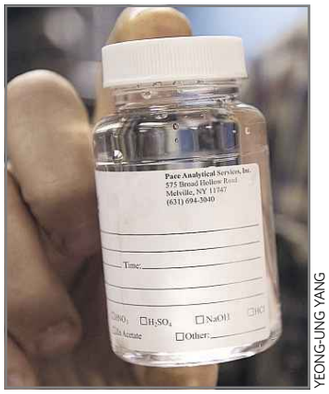
Glen Cove city officials plan to borrow more than twice as much money for capital projects this year as in 2017, with most of the increase going to fund efforts to fight Freon 22 contamination that has closed two city drinking water wells.

"We don't have a choice," said Mayor Timothy Tenke. "It has to be done. Water is that critical."

The city council is scheduled to vote Tuesday on authorizing $8,891,350 in bonds for capital improvements, including $3,575,000 related to installing Freon-removing air strippers. Last year, the council approved $4,191,117 in capital bonds.

Glen Cove officials expect to spend many millions more in the coming years to outfit all six city water wells with air strippers, which, in addition to removing Freon 22, are more effective than currently used equipment in stripping out other contaminants, Tenke said.



YEONG-UNG YANG

A water sample from a Glen Cove drinking-water well

Nassau County ordered two water wells closed — one in November, the other in January — after elevated levels of Freon 22 were found. The county health department on March 28 approved the city's request to reopen one of the wells after Freon 22 levels dropped. It's expected to be online by the end of this month.

Freon 22 is commonly found in air conditioners and other cooling equipment. Health effects on humans from Freon 22 in drinking water are unclear, but studies in laboratory animals have shown that exposure to high levels of airborne Freon 22 cause nervous system and heart problems, according to the state Department of Health.

The city is borrowing $858,000 this year to buy and install the shell of a used air stripper, plus new equipment to go along with it, for the two shuttered wells. The used air stripper is an interim measure — especially during the high-water-use summer months — while a permanent air stripper is installed over the next 12 to 18 months at another well, officials said. That well has been closed since 2011 because of Freon 22 and structural issues, and the work to reopen it with the air stripper is expected to cost $4.7 million, with more than half coming from this year's borrowing.

All of the unanticipated Freon-related spending comes as the city works to stabilize its finances and reduce its debt, which was more than $52 million at the end of 2017, down from about $62 million in late 2013. Moody's Investor Service's most recent report on Glen Cove, on March 20, lauded "recently improved financial results" and gave the city a "positive outlook" but kept Glen Cove's bond rating at Baa 2, the second-lowest investment-grade level.

Tenke said the millions to be spent on the Freon 22 problem "does hurt us when we're trying to get on our feet financially."

Other major projects slated to be funded by the new bonds include the repair of a damaged sea wall, trucking in sand to beaches eroded by the March nor'easters, planning and design work for a new multipurpose athletic field south of Glen Cove Creek, and road and drainage improvements citywide.

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