

Wastewater management initiatives push forward

Feasibility study, implementation plan tied to county wastewater management district announced

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The lack of wastewater treatment throughout some of Suffolk County has led to continued reliance on 360,000 cesspools and septic systems that contribute to nitrogen pollution in local waterways.

Luckily, the recent completion of an environmental study could lead to the replacement of those failing cesspools and septic systems and reduce nitrogen pollution.

Suffolk County executive Steve Bellone recently announced the release of a feasibility study and implementation plan that will guide the rollout of a countywide wastewater management district. The district is responsible for expanding and replacing wastewater infrastructure.

The countywide wastewater management district will create an administrative structure for the county's long-term water-quality plan, or subwatersheds wastewater plan, completed in 2019.

The feasibility study was completed in collaboration with environmental stakeholders like the Suffolk County Water Authority, the Long Island Regional Planning Council, the Nature Conservancy and more. It was funded by a grant from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and LIRPC.

"The completion of this study is an important next step in the ongoing effort to implement a long-term plan to address the lack of wastewater infrastructure that has harmed water quality and been a long-term drag on our economy for decades," Bellone said in a press release.

DEC commissioner Basil Seggos said the DEC "applauds the release of the detailed study concerning the potential creation of a countywide wastewater management district as a critical step toward modernizing Suffolk County's wastewater infrastructure."

According to a press release, the district is expected to benefit homeowners in multiple ways. In phases, it will make system upgrades and sewer connections affordable for homeowners and provide them with expanded financial assistance, better program management, and periodic inspection of septic systems.

Bellone said the district will also spur local job growth and help fuel the post-COVID-19 economic recovery, creating "thousands of jobs and allow for new investments in our downtown business districts."

John Durso, president of the Long Island Federation of Labor, said the county's subwatershed plan is a response to the climate crisis, and the district "ensures our union movement, civic leaders, and businesses as well as all other stakeholders have an opportunity to shape our future in a positive way."

In the future, a task force composed of environmental, civic, and business leaders is expected to develop an implementation strategy and timeline for the proposed district.

The task force will work to implement the next phase of the "critical" plan to treat wastewater, and protect drinking and coastal water resources, Citizens Campaign for the Environment executive director Adrienne Esposito said in a press release.

In 2017, the county established a landmark grant program that makes new nitrogen-reducing technologies available to homeowners who choose to upgrade their cesspools and septic systems. Funded initially with water-quality funding, the program was later awarded \$10 million in state funding from NYS Septic System Replacement Program.

Construction is expected to begin this July on a recently amended county Septic Improvement Program, which would ease costs for low-to-moderate-income homeowners and improve water quality for bodies of water like the Great South Bay and Patchogue River.