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Inside ExploreLI

**TOP STORIES**

# PAYING FOR BETTER

## Coalition offers 2 approaches to raise \$70M a year in Suffolk

BY DAVID M. SCHWARTZ  
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Environmental groups are pushing for a Suffolk County ballot measure that would raise \$70 million a year through either property taxes or water bills to combat nitrogen in waterways by improving wastewater treatment.

The groups submitted ballot language to the county attorney's office March 8 that will ask voters to approve a property tax line dedicated to grants for nitrogen-removing septic systems, sewer expansions and sewage treatment plant improvements.

Separately, the groups have circulated among civic and environmental organizations a draft letter to county lawmakers asking them to support a referendum on a property tax or a fee on water usage.

"The Long Island that many of us grew up with is being killed by sewage — and we must act to fix the problem now," according to the letter from four Long Island environmental groups that formed the Long Island Clean Water Partnership.

According to advocates, average homeowners would pay about \$75 a year under both scenarios, though the Suffolk County Water Authority estimated the costs for a water fee would be \$110 or higher for the average residential water user.

The proposals face skepticism from county lawmakers and Suffolk County Water Authority officials concerned about imposing additional costs on Suffolk residents.

It's no sure thing either measure will qualify for the ballot. Advocates said they're still in the early stages and while they had originally been targeting November, some coalition members suggested this week that the effort might be pushed to 2020, as they continue to gather support among elected officials.

To get on the ballot, the water fee would need approval from the State Legislature. State lawmakers said they'd want to see support from the county legislature and Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone. In 2016, a proposed referendum to raise water rates for wastewater treatment, pushed by Bellone, failed to advance in the State Legislature.

But the proposed property tax could get on the ballot without any legislative support, if backers collect more than 13,000 signatures from Suffolk voters.

While the water fee is preferred by most groups, given residents' opposition to property tax increases, the proposed property tax initiative could be a backup if elected officials balk.

"If the lawmakers don't want to do it, the citizens can do it themselves," said Richard Amper, executive director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society. "We think the public is supportive of water protection today."

**Dangerous algal blooms**

Excess nitrogen has been tied to algal blooms that have decimated shellfish stocks, reduced eel grass populations, depleted oxygen levels in waters, closed swimming at freshwater lakes and damaged natural coastal barriers like marshlands, according to advocates, as well as many environmentalists and academics. A study of the Great South Bay attributed nearly 70 percent of nitrogen to unsewered homes.

About 360,000 homes in Suffolk County are not connected to sewers, and the county has identified 209,000 homes in priority areas to either connect to sewers or install septic systems designed to remove nitrogen.

"The water quality problem is an \$8 billion infrastructure problem," said Nicholas Calderon, public policy adviser for The Nature Conservancy, Long Island, citing countywide esti-



**A septic system is installed at a Nesconset home in 2015. About**

mates to connect homes to sewers or advanced septic systems. "It's not going to be fixed by itself. The only way to fix it is we have dedicated revenue stream. It's the only way we can protect our water."

The Long Island Clean Water Partnership is made up of advocacy groups Citizens Campaign for the Environment, The Nature Conservancy, Group for the East End and Long Island Pine Barrens Society.

"If we're ever going to really address water quality, we're going to need a consistent, reliable funding source," said Adrienne Esposito, executive director of Farmingdale-based Citizens Campaign for the Environment.

Bellone, who has made fighting nitrogen the centerpiece of his environmental agenda, was noncommittal about the

latest initiatives.

"We are reviewing the current proposal and having conversations with local stakeholders," Bellone said in a statement. He, along with county legislators, are on the ballot for re-election this year.

Suffolk Legislature Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory said residents struggling with the high cost of living already have been hit this year by federal tax law changes and water rates that could rise dramatically to treat emerging contaminants in drinking water.

"We have to do something to expand advanced wastewater treatment systems and sewers. But we have to come up with a way that's suitable for the taxpayers," Gregory (D-Copague) said. "They're under a lot of stress and burden. I'm not sure this is neces-

# SEWAGE TREATMENT



JAMES CARBONE

**360,000 homes in Suffolk County are not connected to sewers, contributing to a water-quality problem.**

sarily the way to do it."

Jeffrey Szabo, chief executive officer of the Suffolk County Water Authority, said he would oppose a water fee, though he wouldn't oppose a property tax line.

He said nitrogen is not a major concern for drinking water — only two wells out of the district's 600 need treatment — and levels of nitrogen have stabilized or trended down, as he believes farmers improved how they use fertilizers.

"We believe nitrogen is an issue in surface water, in bays and estuaries. When it comes to a drinking water perspective, it's not something that keeps me up at night," Szabo said. "If environmentalists want a tax for sewer purposes, it should not be hidden in residents' water bills."

He said bills that will average

\$436 a year April 1 could increase an additional 25 percent to 33 percent in future years to pay for treatment of emerging contaminants, which the state is expected to regulate this year.

Additionally, an estimated 25,000 to 40,000 households are on private wells, and don't get a water bill.

Advocates said while a water fee or property tax might not be perfect, it was necessary to find a revenue stream.

"Whether we do it this year or next year is being worked out. But it needs to be done," Esposito said. She called the property tax proposal "a way to get legislators to act on their own. And help them not be so lethargic."

Amper said the partnership would push forward with a referendum this year. "The need is too urgent to wait," he said.

A recurring revenue stream for wastewater would be a capstone of efforts by Bellone and environmental groups that have focused on nitrogen since at least 2014, when the county released an updated water resources plan and Bellone declared nitrogen "public water enemy No. 1."

The county successfully pushed for \$362 million in state and federal grants to sewer areas of Mastic and Babylon as a wetland protection program, and built a county program to permit nitrogen-reducing advanced septic systems.

But the major unanswered question all along has been how to fund the plans. Suffolk County in February put out a bid for a study of a countywide wastewater district, which asked consultants to evaluate potential funding streams, in-

cluding "a surcharge on water usage, and a modest monthly charge to property owners."

A centerpiece of the county's effort so far has been a county grant program to help homeowners pay for new systems, which cost on average of more than \$20,000. Funding so far is limited to \$10 million from the county over five years and \$10 million from the state. Bellone and advocates said that the septic rebate program is threatened over the possibility that homeowners will have to pay taxes on the county and state grants. County Comptroller John Kennedy sent tax forms to homeowners who received the grant, while the Bellone administration said the tax should be paid by the installers who receive the check, citing an opinion from their tax counsel.

#### Long-term funding need

Assemb. Fred Thiele (I-Sag Harbor), who sponsored an Assembly bill to allow a water fee referendum three years ago, was waiting to see if there was support in the State Senate, county legislature and county executive.

Still, he saw a need for local funding.

"This is not a one-year, two-year or five-year program," he said. "I don't think we can make any progress on water quality unless we can commit to funding infrastructure projects over a long period of time."

Republican Minority Leader Tom Cilmi (R-Bay Shore) said he "wouldn't close the door on a referendum," but said language would have to be clear about costs to homeowners. He also noted the county should re-examine how it spends sales tax money dedicated to open-space funding to see if that could be better spent on wastewater treatment.

"It's pretty obvious to me that in order to reduce nitrogen, we need to spend some money," he said. "But we're already spending tens of millions on water quality, mainly through the purchase of open space ... Perhaps it's time to re-examine the allocation of that sales tax, rather than charge people additional

money they don't have."

Legis. Robert Trotta (R-Fort Salonga) said he wouldn't trust county leadership not to raid the fund, because it borrowed \$171 million from a county sewer fund from 2014 to 2017 to pay operating expenses. That money came from a county-wide sales tax.

Amper said the language of the proposals would put the money in a "lockbox" so it couldn't be raided by future administrations.

"We're going to do this one way or the other," Amper said. "I've heard county legislators say to me in the last two or three years, I don't want to be accused of raising taxes. You're not going to be accused of raising taxes, you're going to be accused of not letting people decide."

But not everyone in the environmental community agree that unsewered homes represent a crisis.

John Tanacredi, a Molloy College professor and executive director of the Center for Environmental Research and Coastal Oceans Monitoring, said there's been an overemphasis on the dangers of nitrogen coming from septic systems.

"The coastal environment of Long Island is outstanding," he said, pointing to abundant populations of menhaden, sea turtles in Queens and a recent study showing the Long Island Sound's recovery. Algal blooms and fish kills are all part of a natural process, he said.

"To blame it all on these septic systems is inaccurate," he said.

Chris Gobler, a Stony Brook University professor at the School of Marine and Atmospheric Science who has worked with the county and environmental advocates, said sea grass levels, shellfish landings and wetland coverage all have declined dramatically in the Great South Bay.

Every year, he said, a variety of harmful algal blooms appear from May to October in Long Island waters.

"A series of studies have shown the main source of nitrogen is 360,000 homes not connected to sewage treatment plants," he said.