

Suffolk's sewer expansion plan gets public hearing Wednesday

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Suffolk County legislators are considering a November ballot measure that would raise the county's sales tax to pay for septic systems and sewer upgrades to combat nitrogen in waterways. Credit: Randee Daddona

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The public gets its first chance to weigh in on measures to implement and fund a major expansion of wastewater treatment in Suffolk County during hearings at the county center in Riverhead Wednesday evening.

One hearing focuses on a bill to consolidate Suffolk County's 27 sewer districts, and another on a proposal to raise the county's sales tax by .125% to pay for wastewater treatment upgrades.

Representatives of Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone say the tax hike and consolidation are needed to advance the Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan, a 50-year, \$4 billion effort to reverse nitrogen pollution in Suffolk's ground and surface waters.

Both require approval by the county legislature, and the tax increase also would need voter approval.

It is expected to generate \$3.1 billion between 2024 and 2060 to fund sewer expansions and grants for high-tech septic systems. Nearly three-quarters of Suffolk properties have outdated cesspools that do not remove nitrogen before releasing human waste into the ground.

Environmentalists, union leaders and building trade groups are expected to rally in support before the legislature's general meeting begins at 4 p.m. Public hearings follow at 6:30 p.m.

No member of the Republican caucus, which has an 11-7 majority in the legislature, has publicly said whether they would support the tax increase.

Legis. Jason Richberg (D-West Babylon), the legislature's minority leader, said his caucus is likely to support it.

A .125% sales tax increase would boost taxes on a \$1,000 purchase by \$1.25, compared with the current 8.625% tax rate.

A separate hearing on Wednesday will focus on an appeal process for those who report child abuse claims and a caseworker decides there is no credible evidence. The bill, sponsored by Legis. Kara Hahn (D-Setauket), would create a panel which could determine whether further investigation is needed.

The proposed law was prompted by the death of 8-year-old Thomas Valva, who froze to death on Jan. 17, 2020, after his father Michael Valva and Angela Pollina, his fiancée at the time, forced Thomas to sleep in an unheated garage in their Center Moriches home. After Thomas' death, it was revealed that Suffolk CPS received dozens of complaints of abuse but did not remove Thomas or his brothers from the home.

Valva and Pollina were found guilty of second-degree murder in separate trials and are serving 25 years to life in prison.

Hahn noted that during their trials, school officials had said they made numerous CPS complaints that were determined to be unfounded.

"This bill looks to fix that flaw in the system," she said.