

OPINIONCOMMENTARYGUEST ESSAYS

State lawmakers must pass Suffolk plan for clean water



Dr. Chris Gobler Presser of Stony Brook University's School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences (SoMAS). Credit: John Roca

By Christopher J. Gobler Guest essay March 30, 2023

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Water is Long Island's most precious resource, and this year Suffolk County voters could have the chance to vote to protect it. Our drinking water comes from the aquifer below our feet and the water not extracted discharges into our rivers, bays and harbors, where it becomes a part of our coastal ecosystems, affecting fisheries and marine habitats.

Unfortunately, as Suffolk was developed during the 20th century, newly constructed homes were not connected to sewage treatments plants but instead were designed to divert untreated household waste into cesspools and septic leaching rings.

Presently, more than 360,000 homes are discharging wastewater into our aquifer, and this practice has exacted a serious toll on our waters. For example, the level of nitrate in our aquifer has steadily risen to 3.8 milligrams per liter, a concentration that has been shown to be epidemiologically associated with a greater risk of gastrointestinal cancers and birth defects.

This level of nitrate is also 100 times greater than the amount in surface waters, and more than two decades of research has demonstrated that the discharge of this pollution has had

cascading negative effects — stimulating the occurrence of harmful algal blooms that have destroyed our most prized shellfisheries, shading out seagrasses that are critical habitats for fish, and promoting fish kills.

The good news is that there is a solution that voters will, hopefully, be able to decide on this fall — but only if state budget negotiations succeed in allowing that.

Over the past decade, there has been an unprecedented level of science-driven policy change to address this household sewage pollution. Suffolk County has established an entire new health code enabling homes to cease the practice of discharging raw sewage into our drinking water supply and, instead, have their homes connected to clean water septic systems that remove nitrates and other chemicals that do not belong in our bays and harbors or drinking water supply.

The county's Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan developed a comprehensive groundwater model and compiled hundreds of thousands of data points to create a science-based plan that prioritizes remediation in areas that will be maximally protective of public water supplies and coastal ecosystems. This plan positions Suffolk to reverse course on decades of declines in drinking and surface water quality and to make a generational investment in the health and well-being of our children and their children.

The proposed Suffolk County Water Quality Restoration Act will provide a dedicated and recurring countywide funding source to transform this plan into action. Passage of this bill as part of the state budget will empower the voters of Suffolk County to decide whether an increase of 1/8 cent in the county sales tax should be dedicated to protecting water resources by installing sewers and clean water septic systems, while attracting and matching state and federal infrastructure funding.

With so much of Long Island's economy and way of life reliant on clean water, it is imperative that the state give Suffolk voters the opportunity to protect this critical resource with this science-based, effective plan.

This guest essay reflects the views of Christopher J. Gobler, endowed chair of coastal ecology and conservation and professor in the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences at Stony Brook University.