

# Here's why most of Suffolk County doesn't have sewers

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John Flynn, who was in charge of the Southwest Sewer District project, at the Bergen Point plant on April 21, 1975.  
Credit: Newsday / Bob Luckey

Suffolk County officials had plans half a century ago for sewers throughout much of the county, from Smithtown and Huntington to Southold and East Hampton. The reality today is that nearly 75 percent of homes in Suffolk County — some 360,000 residences — are not connected to sewers and rely instead on septic tanks and/or cesspools, through which wastewater flows into the ground and Long Island's bays, rivers and the Sound.

What happened? How does Suffolk — an upscale suburban area just outside one of the world's major cities — find itself struggling with a problem the rest of the region handled decades ago? The answer lies in the history of the Southwest Sewer District project of the 1970s, one of Long Island's biggest scandals. It was supposed to be a first step in establishing the county's sewer infrastructure, but the

program was so plagued by cost overruns, mismanagement and corruption that until 10 years ago, all proposed sewer projects had become politically toxic, observers said.

And by the time elected leaders started discussing the topic again, the federal government, which along with the state paid for 87.5 percent of the costs of the Southwest Sewer District, stopped regularly funding sewer projects. “The Southwest Sewer District scandals hit and shortly thereafter, the federal funding went away. You had the one-two punch right there,” said Dennis Kelleher, senior vice president with Melville-based engineering firm H2M Water.

An ambitious 1967 plan had sewers crossing from the South Shore of western Suffolk to Huntington, Smithtown and Commack. Voters rejected it 6 to 1. Two years later, officials put forward a scaled-down version and ran an aggressive campaign warning that residents would otherwise essentially be drinking from their toilets. “Long Island is the outstanding example in the world where a major population discharges sewage in groundwaters. Even people in underdeveloped countries tell me they can’t understand it,” said Dwight Metzler, New York State’s deputy health commissioner for environmental services, in a Sept. 26, 1969, Newsday article.

Voters narrowly approved it, creating the Southwest Sewer District, covering Babylon and parts of Islip. The project was originally estimated to cost \$291 million, but within four years the price was \$588 million. Ultimately, the Southwest Sewer District would cost more than \$1 billion and take 14 years before the first flush went through the system.

The lead engineering firm on the project was a small Melville-based company, Bowe, Walsh and Associates, run by Charles Walsh. Of the \$54 million they were paid for the job, an audit years later showed that \$31 million was based on fraudulent claims. Walsh, who was later captured on videotape describing himself as “a natural-born master criminal,” was eventually convicted of federal charges connected with channeling money from sewer contractors to key politicians.

At one time more than a dozen official investigations tried to detect the scams behind the project. They revealed watered-down concrete in sewer pipes, a rigged bid for lab equipment, and an audit sanitized to remove any suggestion of kickbacks.

The most dramatic moment came in June 1979, when John Flynn, the county official directly in charge of the project, was indicted on a charge of lying to a Suffolk grand jury. Within hours of being charged, Flynn told an assistant district attorney he would tell all, adding, “I’m fed up with covering up for everyone else,” Newsday reported.

But before he revealed the project’s secrets, he was stabbed to death, in the back with a fishing knife, by Sue Thurber Quinn, his lover and former employee. Quinn eventually told authorities she killed Flynn because he had cheated on her, not because of the sewer district scandal, according to a Newsday account. Even those not implicated in the scandal were tarnished by their support of sewers. Huge concrete pipes on roadsides were spray-painted with campaign slogans against incumbent County Executive John V.N. Klein of Smithtown: “Flush Klein in ‘79.” A previously popular official with a promising career never connected to the scandals, Klein was defeated in a bitter primary against Islip Supervisor Peter F. Cohalan. For a generation, politicians steered clear of the subject.

“The Southwest Sewer District left such a bad taste, it put an end to any vision or ideas of sewerizing all of Suffolk County,” said Paul Sabatino, a former Suffolk chief deputy county executive and legislative

counsel, in a recent interview. Mitchell Pally, CEO of the Long Island Builders Institute, said he believes without the corruption scandals, sewers would have spread farther east in Suffolk, including through Brookhaven — “without a doubt.”

Today, though, some observers said public opinion has shifted and there is not the same resistance to the idea of sewers. Jim Morgo, former economic development commissioner for Suffolk County, thinks a consensus has formed between developers, county officials and environmentalists that sewers are needed in parts of Suffolk, especially in downtowns and industrial areas and for multifamily units.

The scandal “is a distant memory. And everybody knows that sewers are essential for economic development and environmental protection,” said Morgo, now a land-use consultant who represents developers in their dealings with local governments. The problem now is how to fund it. The federal Environmental Protection Agency phased out a construction grant program in 1987 that had funded sewage treatment plants and planning.

Now, significant federal or state money for sewers has been tied to specific grants. Suffolk is slated to get \$383 million in federal and state money for sewer projects in the Mastic/Shirley, Oakdale and Patchogue areas, to improve wetlands for storm resiliency after superstorm Sandy. Pally said that money will help, but won’t provide sewers for all the areas that need them. “We get some money, but it takes a hurricane to do something like that,” he added.

*With Emily Dooley*