

Suffolk proposal to replace failing cesspools with septic tanks

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A proposed Suffolk County law would require homeowners to replace failing cesspools with septic tanks starting in 2019 as the county begins an overhaul of how it regulates wastewater systems.

The requirement, brought forward by County Executive Steve Bellone's administration, would affect an estimated 5,000 to 9,000 homes a year, county officials told the legislature's Environmental Committee Monday.

Replacing a cesspool costs between \$4,000 and \$8,000 depending on the house, and installing a septic tank would cost about \$2,000 more, said Nick Motta, owner of Affordable Cesspool, Sewer and Drain, of Hauppauge, which manufactures and installs cesspools and septic tanks. County officials also estimated the new requirement would cost an additional \$2,000 per household.

County legislators tabled the bill Monday, saying they wanted to discuss concerns about costs. It will be heard again in the committee later this month.

Since 1973, the county has required both a septic tank and a leaching structure in new construction. But Suffolk has allowed homeowners to replace failing cesspools — typically concrete rings or walls without a bottom — with new cesspools.

Suffolk officials estimate there are 252,000 homes that only have cesspools, out of 360,000 homes not connected to sewers.

Walter Dawydiak, director of the county's Division of Environmental Quality, said septic tanks help remove some nitrogen, and also reduce pollution from pharmaceuticals, pathogens and personal care products.

Septic systems would also make it easier to install new “advanced” wastewater treatment systems that remove nitrogen if the county mandates them in the future, Dawydiak, said.

Kevin McDonald, conservation project director at The Nature Conservancy on Long Island, called the proposal a “good first step in a series of efforts that have to begin.”

Long Island Builders Institute chief executive officer Mitchell Pally also expressed support. In a statement Monday, he called it a start “towards regulating what is currently being put in the ground. The measure would make replacement of failing septic and cesspools with advanced systems “much more manageable.”

But Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory (D-Copiaque) was among lawmakers who expressed concern about the additional expense to residents.

“People are struggling, literally, to stay in their homes. Two thousand dollars may not seem like a lot to some, but it’s a lot to some people in my district,” Gregory said.

Under the bill, Suffolk County would begin in July to require that liquid waste providers report pump-outs at homes to the county. Three pump outs in a year would indicate a failed system.

The proposed changes to how Suffolk deals with unsewered homes are the first in a series expected over the next year. Deputy County Executive Peter Scully said in 2018, legislators likely will be asked to consider a bill to require the use of innovative/advanced onsite wastewater treatment systems in new construction and in homes where conventional systems fail.

The county says the new systems — four of which have provisional approvals and still are being tested — cost between \$15,000 and \$20,000.