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TOP STORIES

Suffolk water-quality measure looking iffy

BY DAVID M. SCHWARTZ
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A proposed ballot referendum that would raise up to \$70 million a year for Suffolk wastewater projects through a water fee is struggling to gain traction in Albany, with the bill yet to get a sponsor in the State Senate and lacking support from County Executive Steve Bellone and county lawmakers.

Environmentalists are making a late push to pass the measure before the State Legislature adjourns June 19.

"This is the most urgent thing that government should be doing, and there's absolutely no excuse for putting it off," said Dick Amper, executive director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society. "I don't know how anyone thinks we can improve water quality if we don't have a revenue stream."

Adrienne Esposito, executive director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment, said, "There's a distant chance of it happening this year, considering it's not even introduced yet. . . . Each day, the chance that it gets introduced and passing fades a little more."

A bill introduced by Assemb. Fred Thiele (I-Sag Harbor) on May 3 would assess a per-gallon water charge to fund wastewater projects in the county, including nitrogen-removing septic systems, sewer expansions and wastewater treatment plant upgrades. It is supported by four Long Island environmental groups, including the Group for the East End and the Nature Conservancy on Long Island.

Advocates estimate the cost would be \$60 to \$70 annually for the median water user, though the Suffolk County Water Authority said the average household would pay \$165 a year. An earlier proposal, to fund wastewater upgrades through a property tax charge, by collecting enough signatures to put it on the ballot, was dropped because of the cost of collecting signatures and deadlines.

Bellone and environmental groups have focused on nitrogen since 2014, when the county released an updated



An advanced septic system that removes nitrogen from water being installed at a home last year.

water resources plan and Bellone declared nitrogen "public water enemy No. 1."

Excess nitrogen has been tied to algal blooms that have hurt shellfish stocks, reduced eel grass acreage and depleted oxygen levels in waters, according to environmentalists and academics.

The Suffolk County Water Authority, which opposes the concept of collecting a fee on water bills for wastewater projects, has said nitrogen is not a top concern in drinking water.

To fight nitrogen, the county has been building a program to permit advanced septic systems, and some East End towns have been requiring installation of the new systems for new construction or expansion.

The major unanswered question has been how to fund the plans. Estimates to connect the two-thirds of Suffolk County homes not sewered have ranged from \$7 billion to \$8 billion.

Environmentalists had been encouraged about the possibility of last-minute passage of the referendum after a May 24 meeting with Sen. John Brooks (D-Seaford). They said they left the meeting optimistic he would sponsor the bill.

Brooks, in an interview May 28, said: "I'm interested in the bill; I'm considering it. I will review it up in Albany and make a final decision."

Joe Agovino, the senator's spokesman, said this week that while Brooks is "interested in the idea of the bill, there are several items he would like to discuss before sponsoring an accompanying bill in the Senate."

Thiele last week said even if the measure passes this year, it is unlikely there would be enough time to get a referendum on the ballot in November, and a vote would likely take place in 2020 or 2021.

Still, he said, support from county elected officials would be needed. "For anything like this to move forward, there needs to be some indication from the county they want to move ahead with the bill," Thiele said.

Bellone, who is running this year for a third term, has declined to comment about the bill.

His spokesman, Jason Elan, would not answer questions about Bellone's position on the initiative. In a statement, Elan said the administration is focused on spending state and federal money for sewers and state grants for nitrogen-reduc-

ing septic systems — funding that totals nearly \$400 million.

"Since it will take years to get this funding out the door, it is imperative that we remain focused on getting these projects to the finish line," he wrote.

Amper, however, said that Bellone has told environmentalists he doesn't want a water-fee question on the ballot at the same time he is running for reelection. Elan did not respond to a question about Amper's assertion.

"How can he be Mr. Clean Water and not let the public decide?" Amper said. He said Suffolk voters have passed tax-carrying referendums to protect the Long Island pine barrens, and East End town voters have passed tax increases to protect the environment.

Kevin McDonald, policy adviser for the Nature Conservancy on Long Island, said, "Things are extremely fluid, but nothing is trending our way right now." But, he added, "things are happening extremely fast."

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