

Gyrodyne sewage plant proposal wins initial approval

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Gyrodyne company officials are proposing to develop 75 acres of its property in St. James. Credit: Randee Daddona

By **Nicholas Spangler** nicholas.spangler@newsday.com [@spanglernewsday](https://twitter.com/spanglernewsday)

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Gyrodyne's proposal for a sewage treatment plant to support development of its St. James property advanced this week with a certification from the Suffolk County Sewer Agency.

The nonbinding measure, called a conceptual certification, is intended for projects like Gyrodyne's where applicants seek broad guidance on the type of wastewater disposal methods the agency would like to see before they seek its final approval for a specific design. In this case, the sewer agency cannot grant that approval until Smithtown officials finish an environmental review of the company's broader proposal to subdivide its 75-acre property for uses, such as a hotel, assisted living facility and offices.

The agency's board, composed of four Suffolk County officials and three county legislators, voted 7-0 Monday to approve the measure. A staff memo recommended approval. The plant would handle up to 100,000 gallons of wastewater per day, replacing on-site septic systems currently in use. There is no municipal sewer district in the area.

Opponents including residents and some local elected officials — though not, notably, Smithtown Town Board members — have said Gyrodyne’s plans could wreak traffic, water and environmental woes on the area. Assemb. Steve Englebright (D-Setauket) warned in a letter to the agency’s commissioner last week that the plant would create “significant impacts” for the environmentally sensitive Stony Brook Harbor, which is nearby.

Brookhaven civic leaders including George Hoffman and Cindy Smith also pleaded for no votes at Monday’s Zoom hearing, suggesting that the certification would be little more than a marketing tool for Gyrodyne as the company attempts to sell its lots and warning that the county may be left in charge of the plant after the company liquidates and goes out of business, a plan company leadership announced in 2017.

“They will leave everybody stuck with the problems and expenses” of biohazards and nitrogen pollution, said Carl Safina, a Stony Brook University ecologist.

A Gyrodyne engineer said Monday the proposed plant would use a technology called a sequencing batch reactor, which would actually reduce the amount of nitrogen leaving the site and going into the watershed, though a Suffolk Health department representative said she had not seen the engineering report that would confirm that claim.

Smithtown Supervisor Edward Wehrheim and his fellow town board members, wary of the possibility of industrial development at the site and excited over the economic development prospects, have been generally supportive of the project and Wehrheim underscored their position in a letter he sent to the agency Monday.

Town officials have also asked the company to consider building a treatment plant with capacity to serve downtown St. James, where work is underway to lay a dry sewer line in anticipation of future hookup. Gyrodyne representatives said Monday that their application does not include plans for a plant of that size, though there is room for expansion to treat the additional 71,000 gallons per day the St. James hookup would bring.

That hookup would reduce the total amount of nitrogen now leaching into the ground from septic systems, they said.