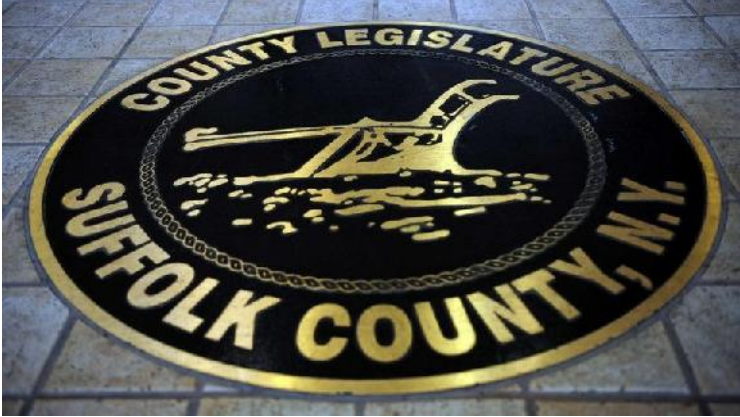


Suffolk sewer expansion plan prompts new complaints by Republicans

<https://www.newsday.com/long-island/suffolk/suffolk-sewer-atrvw3i4>



Majority Republicans in the Suffolk County Legislature are raising new concerns about a plan for widespread expansion of sewers in the county. Credit: Newsday / Thomas A. Ferrara

By Vera Chinese vera.chinese@newsday.com [@VeraChinese](https://www.instagram.com/VeraChinese) Updated July 25, 2023

Republican Suffolk County legislators are raising new concerns about a major sewer expansion proposal — particularly a mandate for some homeowners to install costly high-tech septic systems — as a deadline to put a funding measure on the November ballot approaches.

Backers of the initiative say GOP lawmakers are trying to stall the plan for political reasons in a year when all 18 legislature seats are up for election, an assertion legislative Presiding Officer Kevin McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst) strongly denied.

The Republican-controlled legislature last month shelved a plan to consolidate the county's 27 sewer districts and to fund a sweeping expansion of wastewater treatment in Suffolk through a .125% sales tax increase. The tax increase, which requires voter approval, would fund sewers and grants for septic upgrades for individual property owners.

The legislature would have to sign off on the sales tax increase measure by Aug. 4 for it to be on the ballot in the Nov. 7 general election. Tuesday is the last time the legislature will meet before September.

Democrats, environmentalists and union leaders have rallied behind the sales tax initiative, saying it is needed to advance Suffolk's Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan, a 50-year, \$4 billion effort to reverse nitrogen pollution in local waterways. County legislators including McCaffrey unanimously adopted that plan in 2020.

Nearly 75% of Suffolk properties are served by outdated septic systems which do not remove nitrogen from wastewater.

A spokeswoman for Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone, a Democrat, on Monday said in a prepared statement, "We continue to work with all the stakeholders — legislators, unions, environmentalists, business organizations and community groups — to seize an historic opportunity to fix Suffolk's clean water crisis."

The legislature, controlled 11-7 by the GOP, is unlikely to approve or even vote on the sales tax and sewer district consolidation measures during the general meeting scheduled for Tuesday in Hauppauge, McCaffrey said in an interview.

McCaffrey cited numerous concerns and unanswered questions about proposals such as a requirement for property owners to upgrade septic systems upon transfer of a property.

Republicans have also said the plan allocates too much money for septic systems compared with sewers.

The Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan calls for, starting in 2026, requiring owners in some areas who are selling their homes to first install high-tech septic systems costing up to \$30,000 without possible grants.

The county legislature would have to approve such a mandate.

"I can tell you right now as I am sitting here, the Republican majority would never mandate [a septic upgrade] upon the sale of a house," McCaffrey said.

Democratic backers of the sewer expansion plan say Republicans and Conservatives don't want it on the ballot because it could bring out Democratic voters.

"They're poking holes in it," Legis. Bridget Fleming (D-Noyac) said of the Republican response to the plan. "When they learn those reasons don't hold up, there's another argument. So that's why I'm just concluding that it's very political."

McCaffrey countered that the popular move would be to support an initiative seen as pro-environment. "I think politically we'd be in a better place to go along with this," he said.