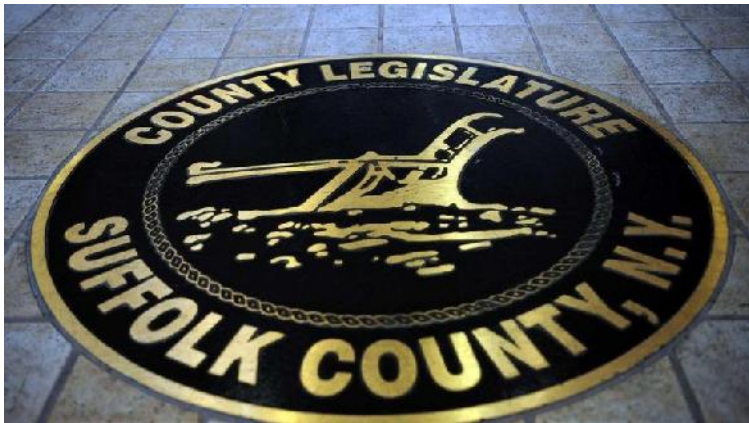


Suffolk hearings set on major sewer expansion plan

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Suffolk legislators are expected to set a public hearing on a proposal to increase the sales tax by 0.125% to fund sewer expansion. Credit: Newsday/Thomas A. Ferrara

By Vera Chinese vera.chinese@newsday.com [@VeraChinese](#) Updated June 6, 2023

Suffolk County legislators on Tuesday took an initial step on a proposal that could widely expand use of sewers and high-tech septic systems in the county as they set public hearings on the issue for later this month.

Hearings on measures to consolidate county sewer districts and to raise the sales tax by .125% to fund a major expansion of wastewater treatment will take place June 21 at 6 p.m. at the county center in Riverhead.

Representatives of Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone say the tax hike and consolidation are needed to advance the Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan, a 50-year, \$4 billion effort to reverse nitrogen pollution in Suffolk's ground and surface waters.

The consolidation and tax initiatives require approval by the county legislature, and the sales tax increase also would need voter approval in a referendum.

But some Republican county legislators have expressed concern about increasing the sales tax and how the new revenues would be used.

Legislative Presiding Officer Kevin McCaffrey also questioned the impact of consolidation on residents of the Southwest Sewer District. He noted their taxes have funded previous infrastructure expansion, and residents had expected to recoup some of the investment by charging fees to property owners from outside the district for use of the Bergen Point Wastewater Treatment Plant.

Under the plan before the legislature, the Southwest Sewer District would be subsumed into the new countywide sewer district.

"I need to make sure that it's the best thing for the residents of Suffolk County and the residents and ratepayers of the Southwest Sewer District," McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst) said. "That's going to be a little bit of process, but this is the first step."

Deputy Suffolk County Executive Peter Scully said during a Public Works Committee meeting last week that the measures advanced Tuesday only enable public hearings, and that legislators will have time to study the issue before voting.

"If providing the wastewater infrastructure needed to ensure clean water across the county was simple or easy, the problem would have been solved a long time ago," Scully said in a statement.

The Suffolk County Water Quality Restoration Act, included in the 2023-24 state budget, authorized creation of a county sewer district and gave approval for Suffolk County to hold a referendum on raising the sales tax by .125%.

No member of the Republican caucus, which has an 11-7 majority in the legislature, has publicly said whether they would support the sales tax increase.

Legis. Anthony Piccirillo (R-Holtsville), Legis. Leslie Kennedy (R-Smithtown) and Legis. Rob Trotta (R-Fort Salonga) on Tuesday voted against scheduling a public hearing on creation of a countywide sewer district. A separate vote on a hearing for the tax proposal was not required.

Minority leader Jason Richberg (D-West Babylon) said he expected members of his caucus to support the initiative.

A countywide sewer district that replaced the numerous small sewer districts in the county would equalize sewer taxes, according to the legislation. The average homeowner with a parcel connected to sewers would pay \$670 per year. Property owners not connected to sewers would not pay the tax.

For instance, a .125% sales tax increase would boost taxes on a \$1,000 purchase by \$1.25, compared with the current 8.625% tax rate.

The Suffolk County Legislature has until Aug. 4 to vote on putting the tax hike on the November ballot.

Also Tuesday, representatives of two Suffolk County school districts spoke at a public hearing against a resolution to repeal the county's school bus camera ticket program.

Under the program, first-time offenders receive a \$250 fine for failing to stop when a school bus flashes its red lights and extends its stop arm.

John Ryan, transportation coordinator for the Longwood Central School District, said the number of times vehicles illegally pass school buses has dropped significantly since the bus camera program began.

"Our children are safer because of this program," Ryan said.

Trotta, who sponsored the resolution to repeal the program, said residents have complained to him about having to slam on their brakes to stop in time.

The public hearing on the measure was recessed until the June 21 general meeting.