

Schumer: Check the radium



BY DAVID M. SCHWARTZ

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The U.S. Navy would hire a second consultant to check radium levels in Bethpage groundwater under an amendment being pushed by Sen. Chuck Schumer, who said Monday the contractor has a “checked past.”

Pasadena, California-based Tetra Tech in 2017 was caught falsifying soil tests at a San Francisco Superfund site and is being sued by the U.S. Justice Department.

“We don’t want anyone to have any doubts about the safety of the water supply, and if we make sure there’s a second check, we’ll all be much happier,” Schumer (D-N.Y.) said at a Monday news conference at Bethpage Water District headquarters with other officials.

Tetra Tech did not respond to requests for comment.

The Navy, through Tetra Tech, has done radium testing as part of the pollution cleanup in Bethpage from the former Northrop Grumman and Navy facilities. The Navy previously has said radium levels are within naturally occurring ranges, though some environmental groups and attorneys for residents have raised concerns about the levels.

Since 2012, one Bethpage Water District well has not been

used for drinking water because of elevated radium levels, though it did not exceed state or federal drinking water standards.

“I think anytime you can get another set of eyes looking at the data, just to confirm nothing gets missed is a great thing,” Mike Boufis, superintendent of the Bethpage Water District, said after the news conference. “I don’t feel this is slowing up any other process. Hopefully it’ll bring some closure to what we’ve been battling — is this naturally occurring? Or is this from the plume?”

Radium was widely used during World War II because its luminescence allowed aircraft dials, gauges and instruments to be seen at night. It occurs naturally at low levels in rock, soil, water, plants and animals, and is considered a carcinogen.

Melville-based attorney Nicholas Rigano, who represents a group suing the state and Navy over the cleanup and possible health effects, said the testing should be done by a third party. The Navy, Northrop Grumman and their contracts have “misled the public” about what levels are naturally occurring to avoid having to pay for the cleanup, he said in a statement. He said the \$585 million proposed state plan released in May to clean up and contain the plume “ignores radium, leaving it to per-

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer wants the U.S. Navy to hire a second consultant to test radium levels in Bethpage groundwater: “We don’t want anyone to have any doubts” about safety.

MORGAN CAMPBELL

Man-made wetland to treat wastewater

BY TITUS WU

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Suffolk County’s waters are contaminated with nitrogen coming from waste, but a potential solution lies in Cold Spring Harbor’s Uplands Farm Sanctuary.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone — along with county legislators, scientists and representatives from the Nature Conservancy of Long Island — celebrated the completion of a man-made wetland Monday designed to treat wastewater and reduce nitrogen levels.

“What we drink is underneath us, in the aquifers below,” said the county’s water quality

head Peter Scully. “It’s become increasingly clear that lack of sewage [treatment] in Suffolk County is having significant negative impact on our water resources. We decided to use a constructed wetland system to dilute our nitrogen.”

The wetland, which replaced four cesspools — holding tanks that eventually leech untreated waste directly into the ground — includes sewage treatment tanks underground and four beds of native plants aboveground, where their roots host nitrogen-eating bacteria.

Stony Brook University’s Center for Clean Water Technology will be testing and monitoring nitrogen levels on the wetland, and the Nature Con-

servancy will be using that data to “make it smaller and more efficient,” said Chris Clapp from the Nature Conservancy.

That way, “people can install [this wetland system] in front of an office building, at their homes or at the park,” Clapp said.

The wetland is open to the public for visitors to learn about the system, and Clapp said he hopes the work coming out of the upcoming research will help homeowners install similar systems affordably and effectively.

Nearly 75 percent of Suffolk homes have no connection to a sewage system. This means all that nitrogen-rich waste from those homes is either stored into cesspools or antiquated sep-

tic systems.

Under its Reclaim Our Water program, the county is urging homeowners and businesses to switch to new, updated septic systems to reduce nitrogen pollution, and 300 to 500 of them have been installed, according to Scully. Just over 110 grants have been awarded to homeowners to help pay to install the systems, he said.

The county is hoping the wetlands system will be a solution that homeowners will consider besides a traditional wastewater disposal system.

“We’re looking into ways of reducing nitrogen in an environmentally friendly way,” said Legis. William Spencer (D-Centerport), who pushed for con-

structing the sanctuary’s wetland back in 2015. “Not take and build large infrastructure but just take advantage of our natural geography to use it.”

The cost of the sanctuary’s wetland project was \$145,000, along with \$40,000 in education and outreach, according to Clapp. The source of funding was split into roughly three equal amounts between the Long Island Sound Study, the county and the Nature Conservancy.

Suffolk’s goal is to reduce nitrogen levels to 19 milligrams per liter of wastewater. The county already has another similar wetlands project in Shelter Island, Scully said, and it’s already reduced nitrogen levels to

levels again

sist in the plume indefinitely.”

A spokeswoman for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, which is overseeing the cleanup, said it “carefully reviews all sampling plans and data and requires the U.S. Navy to provide any and all information related to the work conducted at Navy and Grumman remediation sites to ensure the accuracy and validity of information collected.”

The Navy and Northrop Grumman did not respond to requests for comment Monday.

Tetra Tech already has completed four radium samplings at the Naval Weapons Industrial Reserve Plant in Bethpage, according to Schumer’s office. The first sampling was done in April and May in 2018, the second in September 2018, the third in December 2018, and the fourth most recently in March. Tetra Tech is scheduled to conduct a fifth sampling this month.

In September 2017, the Navy released a preliminary analysis of a cleanup at the Hunters Point Shipyard in San Francisco, which found that nearly half of the samples taken from the site had been falsified or manipulated, according to Schumer’s office. Two field supervisors pleaded guilty in 2017 to falsifying records by directing workers to substitute samples from potentially contaminated areas for clean soil samples.

The plume from the former

Northrop Grumman and Navy facilities in Bethpage is considered Long Island’s largest groundwater pollution source, with 24 contaminants, including TCE, a human carcinogen that according to the Environmental Protection Agency is toxic to the immune and reproduction systems, but which is being treated for at well heads.

Oyster Bay Superintendent Joseph Saladino said tests for radium should be subject to a “third party review.”

He said even though radium has been found as part of the legacy of the Grumman and Navy operations, the drinking water has met federal and state drinking water standards.

The state cleanup plan has drawn praise from Bethpage officials after years of complaints that New York officials had not moved aggressively enough.

“We can’t let Navy and Grumman have another five, six, seven years, which means 15 to 20 down the line. We have to take care of this now,” Bethpage Water District trustee John F. Coumatos said.

A Health Department spokeswoman said, “Routine testing has not shown a violation of drinking water standards for radium for the Bethpage Water District.” She said the level at the Bethpage well taken off-line is “not inconsistent with some naturally-occurring radium concentrations.”

WYANDANCH OKs CONTINGENCY

\$69M budget approved 4-2 after deadlock

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
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After an initial deadlock, Wyandanch’s beleaguered school board huddled privately Monday night and then voted 4-2 to approve a cost-cutting \$69 million contingency budget for the 2019-20 school year.

The package will reduce spending more than \$2 million from the current year.

The board’s initial vote was three trustees in favor, two opposed and one abstaining. Board President James Crawford voted no in both rounds.

The final vote came after trustees went back into closed-door executive session to see if they could break the deadlock.

As the board meeting broke up for the night, Crawford told a reporter he voted no because he was unclear on some details of the projected line-item cuts in the budget. Crawford said he could not provide details immediately and would have to review the budget first.

Many Wyandanch residents, upset by frequent reports of fiscal mismanagement in the district, have voiced hope that Albany will step in and help straighten out the mess.

Lawmakers voted Friday for a state-appointed monitor in the district, but whether that legislation will be signed into law by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and funded by legislators remains a question.

Monday’s public board meeting in Wyandanch was held at the district’s Central Administrative Office.

Voters in the 2,800-student district — the poorest in Suffolk County in terms of taxable income and property wealth — have twice rejected larger budget proposals over the past two

months. The latest defeat came in a June 18 revote, when residents turned down a \$73.3 million package, with 223 no votes to 139 yes votes.

Under the tax cap, Wyandanch would have needed a supermajority of 60 percent or better to pass a high-tax budget.

Both of Wyandanch’s rejected budgets would have raised taxes far beyond the state’s allowable cap — the first by more than 40 percent, the second by 20 percent. Under the statute, two such defeats mean that a district faces both a tax freeze and contingency limits on spending for the next 12 months.

The effects could be devastating. Administrators already have mapped out nearly \$9 million in potential spending cuts for the coming year to stay within contingency limits while also ending a prolonged period of deficit spending.

The austerity plan calls for a \$1 million reduction in student bus services, elimination of 18 teaching positions, cancellation of preschool and after-school programs, stoppage of coaches’ stipend payments and dozens of other cost-cutting moves.

“A lot of employees will be hurt by this,” said Superintendent Mary Jones, who presented details of the contingency budget to a largely critical audience of about 60 residents, teachers and others. “We apologize that this is necessary.”

Tom Walsh, a local union vice president, said during a phone interview Monday that 51 teacher assistants could lose their jobs, to be replaced by 20 full-time teacher aides, 15 part-time assistants and 15 part-time aides. Teacher assistants have greater instructional responsibilities than aides.

Walsh, who has worked in Wyandanch for 15 years, said he and his colleagues are trying to remain optimistic, but worry about potential adverse effects on academic programs and students.

“We do the best we can here,” Walsh said, adding that his colleagues had won awards for their work. “It hurts me so bad, I get choked up when I think about it.”

New York’s cap law first took effect in 2012-13 for a limited time frame. This year, state lawmakers made it permanent.

Until now, the only district on Long Island forced by the law to deal with a tax freeze and contingency budget was tiny Tuckahoe in the Hamptons. Tuckahoe’s turn came three years ago, when the district failed to override its cap on two ballot attempts.

In Wyandanch, another issue that is stirring debate is legislation allowing state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia to appoint a monitor empowered to veto spending decisions by the district’s board. The measure was among many approved in the final hours of the legislative session, which ended Friday.

The measure has bipartisan sponsorship, including support from state Sens. John Brooks (D-Seaforth) and Phil Boyle (R-Bay Shore).

“We believe the district is well in debt; they haven’t paid bills for the last six months,” Brooks said in a phone interview earlier Monday. “We felt we had to get a monitor in there.”

Actual installation of a monitor is not certain. The governor would have to sign the bill into law, and an aide on Monday would only say that the measure is under review along with hundreds of others approved by the legislature this month.

Funding for a monitor, estimated at several hundred thousand dollars, is another question. An aide to state Assemb. Kimberly Jean-Pierre (D-Wheatley Heights) said financing had not been confirmed.

“We’re seeing what we can do to fund it,” said Brendan Cunningham, Jean-Pierre’s chief of staff. *With Yancey Roy*



Legis. Steven Flotteron, left, County Executive Steve Bellone, Nancy Kelley and Chris Clapp in Cold Spring Harbor on Monday.

10 milligrams per liter.

The goal for this wetlands project? To reduce nitrogen levels as much as possible as well.

“They have installed effectively the gold standard here for

clean water technology,” Bellone said of this project. It will “make sure Long Island is achieving its full potential and that we are protecting this precious resource: our water quality.”