

LONG ISLAND

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Deal made on Suffolk water fund

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Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and environmentalists yesterday touted a deal that would resolve their differences over the county's practice of borrowing from its drinking water protection fund.

Under the deal, which still requires approval from the county lawmakers and voters in November, the county agreed to bond for \$30 million to fund open space and clean water projects. It would be allowed to continue to borrow from part of the fund for three years for general budget purposes, but would have to ask voters before diverting those funds in future years.

"We can come together to re-

solve our differences," Bellone said in front of a pond at Blydenburgh County Park in Smithtown.

"The county is doing a momentous thing, putting the money where their mouth is," said Richard Amper, executive director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society.

Both Bellone and environmentalists said it represents a significant step together as they fight for federal and state money to improve water quality on Long Island.

If approved, it would settle two lawsuits filed by the Long Island Pine Barrens Society — one over a law passed in 2011 under former County Executive Steve Levy and another filed this year against the county.

The agreement also would suspend a February petition being circulated by environmentalists, which would have asked voters to force the county to repay tens of millions of dollars diverted from the sewer stabilization fund to the county.

To the county's benefit, it will be able to borrow from a \$140 million portion of the fund for its general budget purposes for the next three years. After that, the money would be paid back between 2018 and 2029.

Bob DeLuca, president of the Group for the East End, said requiring voter approval for future changes to the quarter-percent sales tax, which raises money for water fund, was a priority. "It's something in our hearts from the beginning," DeLuca said.