

LONG ISLAND

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Merger plan, water funds on ballot

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Suffolk County residents next Tuesday will vote on propositions that would eliminate the countywide elected office of treasurer and create a nearly \$30 million fund for open space and clean water programs.

Backers of the merger of the treasurer and comptroller's offices say the consolidation will save money. But opponents say the county will lose an independent set of eyes on its finances.

The second proposition would revise a sales-tax-funded drinking water program,

which the county has borrowed against in recent years.

Proponents say it will create a new environmental fund while allowing the county to borrow against it through 2017. Opponents argue that the county can't afford to borrow more and criticize the proposal as a budget-balancing gimmick.

Following are details of the ballot measures:

Proposition 4

The measure would abolish the treasurer's office effective Jan. 1, 2018, at the end of the term of current Treasurer Angie Carpenter, a Republican. The office's functions, which include in-

vesting the county's money and disbursing checks, would be consolidated under the comptroller.

The merger would save \$585,000 in 2018 and \$707,000 in 2019 by eliminating three jobs in the treasurer's office, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Budget Review Office.

The Bellone administration estimates savings of \$800,000 a year by eliminating five positions.

Opponents, including Carpenter and a majority of Republican county legislators, said the predicted savings won't materialize and that eliminating the treasurer's position, one of six countywide elected posi-

tions, would reduce oversight of county spending.

"The treasurer is someone who is independent and accountable to voters," Carpenter said.

Deputy County Executive Jon Schneider said the comptroller and outside auditors would provide sufficient oversight.

"This government is full of checks and balances," said Schneider. "It's a straw argument from a handful of people looking to maintain a handful of patronage jobs."

Proposition 5:

The measure stems from a dispute between environmentalists and Suffolk County over a 1/4-per-

cent sales tax passed by voters.

The sales tax revenue was earmarked to protect drinking water and stabilize sewer rates. But former Suffolk Executive Steve Levy and then Bellone diverted millions in recent years to balance the county's budget.

The proposition would create a \$29.4 million fund for open space and drinking water projects. The county would be able to borrow against the fund to balance its budget through 2017, with the money to be paid back between 2018 and 2029.

Richard Amper, executive director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society, said the proposition would help restore public trust in the program.

Republicans in a joint letter urged a no vote on Proposition 5.