

Southampton Town Releases Draft Of Water Quality Improvement Plan

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[By Jen Newman](#)

Southampton Town officials released the first draft of the Community Preservation Fund Water Quality Improvement Project Plan this week, a document that will provide a blueprint for how the town would use 20 percent of CPF revenues if a referendum in the fall approves the use of the money to improve water quality.

The first priority would be to tackle ineffective septic systems, according to Janice Scherer, principal planner for Southampton Town. Under a three-tiered plan of attack, the town would then work to remediate water bodies, followed by working to restore habitat.

Funded by a 2-percent tax on most real estate transactions, the Peconic Bay Community Preservation Fund is currently used to protect open space, agriculture, historic resources, recreational parks and community character in the five East End towns.

The November referendum will ask voters to allow as much as 20 percent of CPF revenues to be used on water quality projects—an amount that could be \$10 million to \$12 million annually in Southampton Town alone. In addition, the town is proposing to extend the CPF an additional 20 years from its current expiration date in 2030 to 2050. This regional plan involves all five East End towns and will go before the voters in each town to give it final approval in November.

The town's water quality draft highlights possible projects focusing on alternatives to traditional septic systems, as well as aquatic habitat restoration and pollution and runoff prevention. A three-tier system in the draft details the course of action to address such issues through reduction, remediation and restoration.

Councilwoman Christine Scalera said the first focus would be to give residents the ability to upgrade their current systems through incentives that would function as a rebate system.

"It has fantastic potential," Ms. Scalera said. "I think this progression into water quality is absolutely going to benefit the region in the short term, but in the long term, as technology advances, we'll be able to continually reevaluate the criteria. Right now we're starting with the low-hanging fruit by offering incentives to property owners."

"We've ended up with a problem that's going to take a while to solve," said Councilman John Bouvier. "There's nothing we can do today that's going to make it right tomorrow. We see that the first big effort over the first many years will be septic system replacement."

Town officials said they would focus especially on homeowners whose properties are located where nitrogen levels are the highest. According to Mr. Bouvier, there will be several county-approved options for homeowners and businesses to allow them to update their old septic systems.

The water quality plan draft states that the town's aquatic environments receive more nitrogen than what the waters can naturally assimilate. This is due to housing with on-site septic systems that do not adequately remove the nitrogen, which is released into groundwater—then into surrounding coastal waters.

Nitrogen loading to watersheds of Southampton must be reduced in order to restore ecological health and maintain drinking water standards, according to the draft. An additional water protection plan released by the town in the spring noted that the consequences of such water quality impairments could include harmful algal blooms, hypoxia, reduced fish and shellfish populations, and degraded habitats such as eelgrass and groundwater contamination.

"This is the one great unifier," Mr. Bouvier said. "We all breathe the same air and drink the same water. It's also the heartbeat of our economy."

There will be a public hearing on the topic on August 9 at 1 p.m. at Southampton Town Hall.