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Groups join forces to fund East End water quality projects

September 11, 2016 By Jean-Paul Salamanca jeanpaul.salamanca@newsday.com

As East End towns prepare to vote this fall on whether to extend and expand a major land preservation program to fund water quality projects, nearly four dozen groups are banding together, calling for residents to vote “Yes” on keeping the program intact.

About 45 groups composed of environmental and conservation advocates, local businesses and other organizations are forming the Clean Water & Community Preservation Committee. The group’s mission will be to churn out public support for the extension and expansion of the Community Preservation Fund.

Kevin McDonald, conservation finance and policy director for The Nature Conservancy of Long Island, said the effort is “continuously growing” and that the list of groups joining the committee could grow to as many as 100 or more very quickly.

“This will be a very robust group,” McDonald said of the new committee. “All summer long, organizations have been giving positive feedback.”

All five East End towns — East Hampton, Riverhead, Shelter Island, Southampton and Southold — are set to vote Nov. 8 on referendums to extend their Community Preservation Fund’s 2 percent real estate transfer tax by 20 years until 2050. To date, the fund has generated more than \$1 billion and preserved more than 10,000 acres on the East End. About 20 percent of the funds would go toward water quality projects.

Voters approved the fund in 1998, with money coming from taxes on real estate transfers in the five towns, which last year received more than \$100 million total from the tax.

In 2015, Southampton received \$60 million in Community Preservation Fund revenue, while East Hampton received \$28.89 million, Southold got \$6.25 million, Riverhead \$3.17 million and Shelter Island \$1.98 million, according to figures released in April from the office of Assemb. Fred Thiele



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Jr. (I-Sag Harbor).

In December, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo signed a 20-year extension of the program.

East Hampton Town Supervisor Larry Cantwell said the town's water improvement projects would include providing financial incentives for homeowners to replace privately owned, aging septic systems with new technology that would avoid contaminating groundwater.

Cantwell estimated that there are about 20,000 private septic systems in East Hampton, and "it can get expensive" for homeowners to replace those systems.

McDonald said the committee will raise awareness by passing fliers and leaflets in post offices and supermarkets around the East End leading up to the vote.

Adrienne Esposito, executive director for Citizens Campaign for the Environment, called the fund "the most successful program" when it comes to protecting drinking water and preserving land.

"Facing new development pressures, harmful algae blooms and increased nitrogen from sewage demonstrate the imperative need to continue this successful fund," Esposito said in a statement.

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