

EDITORIAL

Save the land, clean the water

East End has plan worth exploring

There is no more debate in Suffolk County on whether action must be taken to reduce nitrogen in local waters. Nor is there confusion about the kinds of things that must be done. The only unknown in this war is how to pay for it. That's the multimillion-dollar question.

County officials have reeled in big federal and state grants, much of them Sandy-related, to expand Suffolk's sewer system. But they still are working on a plan that legislators and voters can support to raise funds that would help homeowners who cannot be connected to sewers upgrade ancient and failing cesspools and septic systems, the source of 70 percent of the county's nitrogen pollution.

Against this backdrop of uncertainty, a financing option is emerging on the East End. East Hampton, Southampton, Riverhead, Southold and Shelter Island are taking steps to tap into an existing revenue stream and use it for water quality projects. The towns are at various stages of placing referendums on the November ballot to extend their Community Preservation Fund's 2 percent real estate transfer tax for 20 years, until 2050, and to be allowed to use up to 20 percent of the money to help reduce nitrogen. It's a terrific idea, and one that voters should approve.

CPF money won't be enough to solve the problem on the East End, where sewers are scarce, but it will help. The five towns combined received about \$101 million last year from the tax, which means some \$20 million would be available every year for improving water quality. The greatest impact would be seen in Southampton and East Hampton, where white-hot real estate markets produced CPF taxes of \$60 million and \$29 million, respectively, followed by Southold (\$6.3 million), Riverhead (\$3.7 million) and Shelter Island (\$2 million).

The towns plan to use some of the funding for their own projects — things like habitat restoration, vegetative buffers to reduce runoff, and water testing — and some for incentive programs for homeowners to replace existing septic systems with new wastewater technology. All are needed steps. Some details still must be worked out, such as whether to prioritize areas for quick action, whether to mandate homeowner changes under certain circumstances, and whether to subject homeowner incentives to a means test, a good idea.

The CPF, which voters agreed to establish in 1998 for land preservation, has been wildly successful. It's generated more than \$1 billion and has protected more than 10,000 acres. But on the South Fork, in particular, land available for protection is dwindling. So allowing some of that revenue to be spent on reducing nitrogen makes sense. State legislation written by Assemb. Fred Thiele and Sen. Ken LaValle and passed in the last session gave the towns the authority to do that, provided voters approve.

They should. Using existing money to wage an expensive war is too good an opportunity to pass up.

— *The editorial board*



DAVID L. POKRESS

A survey of watersheds, including Northport Harbor above, has found that septic systems and cesspools contribute to nitrogen pollution.