

Bay Park sewage treatment plant to get \$150 million for nitrogen-removal system after all, officials say

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Shown are digester tanks at the Bay Park Sewage Treatment Plant in East Rockaway. At right is a 60-foot-high gas sphere on March 9, 2011. Photo Credit: Kevin P. Coughlin

State officials Thursday pledged \$150 million in storm recovery money for a nitrogen removal system at Nassau's Bay Park sewage treatment plant -- a project that wasn't included in the state's plans for the third installment of the federal funds.

Jon Kaiman, the governor's special adviser for Long Island storm recovery, said the federal government still needs to come up with an additional \$550 million for an outfall pipe that would extend into the Atlantic instead of nitrogen-choked Reynolds Channel.

High levels of nitrogen in the roughly 50 million gallons of treated effluent discharged daily are weakening coastal marshlands that buffer the area from harsh waves and severe flooding during storms, according to the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

"We are continuing our commitment to solve that problem by committing \$150 million toward a solution for denitrification," Kaiman said Thursday.

In May, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) said there was an agreement that the nitrogen removal system would be included in the state's plans for the third round of storm recovery money from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, but the project did not appear in the plans, slated to be submitted to HUD Friday.

Sources told Newsday late last month the state had felt it was too early to commit to the nitrogen removal system, especially since funding for the ocean outfall pipe was not secured.

Schumer yesterday called the state's announcement "good news."

"The \$150 million that we allocated in the federal budget is simply waiting for them to ask for it, and it will be there," he said of the state.

Nassau County Executive Edward Mangano lauded the state's move. "This \$150 million will go far to continue our efforts to clean up the Western Bays," he said.

Nassau Presiding Officer Norma Gonsalves said she was "grateful for the funding for the nitrogen removal system, which had already been promised to us."

But, the Republican added: "We are still waiting for an open discussion on the funding for the ocean outfall pipe."

The county already is receiving \$810 million in FEMA funds and \$101 million in storm recovery money to rebuild the East Rockaway plant, which was heavily damaged during superstorm Sandy. But the outfall pipe project still has no designated funding source.

State and federal officials have prevailed on the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but that agency has rejected the funding requests, saying the outfall pipe is not eligible because it did not exist before Sandy.

"The FEMA decision relating to whether or not this is the type of thing they can cover in their guidelines is really going to make the difference in the success or failure of this project," Kaiman said.

On Wednesday, two state officials -- Jamie Rubin, director of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's Office of Storm Recovery, and DEC Commissioner Joe Martens -- sent a four-page letter to FEMA noting the state's commitment of \$150 million and requesting \$550 million for the outfall pipe.

FEMA spokesman Michael Wade said Thursday the agency's position has not changed.

Adrienne Esposito, executive director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment, said she was "ecstatic" the state will pay for the nitrogen removal system, but said the outfall pipe remains a critical need.

"I don't care where the money comes from," she said. "Whether it comes from FEMA or HUD or some other budget line item, it doesn't matter. Because what matters is people are not swimming in sewage."