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Suffolk leaders tout \$75M water quality fee, though some are wary

by Grant Parpan |
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Suffolk County voters could be asked in November to help fund water quality improvement initiatives through a surcharge on water usage.

Flanked by early supporters of his draft legislation, County Executive Steve Bellone announced the Water Quality Protection Fee at a press conference Monday in Yaphank. Amounting to a \$1 surcharge for every 1,000 gallons of water used, the fee would cost the average household about \$73 per year and generate nearly \$75 million in annual revenue, county officials estimate.

The program would aim to reduce nitrogen pollution by using those funds to connect thousands of homes to otherwise costly active treatment systems each year, Mr. Bellone said. Nitrogen from human waste has been blamed for feeding algal blooms that have led to closed beaches and shellfishing areas in creeks and bays across the county.

“This referendum would literally turn the tide on Suffolk County’s water quality crisis,” the county executive announced.

Considerable work must be done before the fee becomes a reality. First, the county Legislature will review and revise the draft legislation before bringing it to a public hearing and vote. The state Legislature must also act to create a referendum on the November ballot. A majority portion of the more than half-million county voters expected to turn out for the presidential election must then approve the fee. It would not go into effect until 2018.

More than a dozen elected officials, planners, builders and environmentalists stood beside Mr. Bellone Monday to support the plan, urging taxpayers to do the same.

East End state Assemblyman Fred Thiele (I-Sag Harbor) called the proposal “bold and unprecedented,” noting that it builds on the recent extension of the Community Preservation Fund, a 2 percent tax on real estate transfers in the five East End towns that was enacted in the late 1990s and now features a provision mandating that 20 percent of those monies be used toward water quality initiatives.

“It is this kind of collaboration that will put us on the path to restoring our waters,” Mr. Thiele said.

Mr. Bellone pointed to a recent report that showed nitrogen concentrations in one of Long Island’s three aquifers rose by 40 percent between 1987 and 2013, while levels in the island’s largest aquifer rose by 80 percent during that same time span. Nitrogen pollution has also been blamed for last year’s fish die-offs in the Peconic River.

Moving away from the use of cesspools and septic systems to state-of-the-art treatment systems that remove nitrogen pollution is among the recommendations in the county’s Comprehensive Water Resources Management Plan, which also recommends the creation of a Water Quality Improvement District.

Through that district, officials would advance three different types of wastewater projects depending on local needs: sewage treatment in areas where connection to a sewer plant is an option; smaller cluster systems for individual communities where feasible; and individual active treatment systems, Mr. Bellone said.

The proposal has been met with skepticism from some county, town and environmental leaders. In an interview with Newsday, which first reported the plan in a front-page story Sunday, Legislator Thomas Barraga (R-West Islip) called the fee “another burden on the average family, which they cannot afford.”

Locally, County Legislator Al Krupski (D-Cutchogue) said he supports bringing the referendum to a public vote but not until a number of concerns he and other legislators have raised are addressed. Specifically, Mr. Krupski said it’s not yet clear if homeowners with private wells

will be subject to the fees, a concern echoed by Southold Town Supervisor Scott Russell, who noted that a majority of residents in his town are hooked up to private wells.



Mr. Krupski also wants to further examine how farmers whose seasonal water usage is weather- and crop-dependant would be impacted by the proposal. Additionally, he would like to see a countywide drainage code and water conservation plan addressed in the proposal.

As for his colleagues in the Legislature who have already come out against the referendum, Mr. Krupski said something needs to be done.

“If we want to address water quality and we all are putting the impairments ... in the ground than we all need to pay to make sure we protect our water for the next generation,” Mr. Krupski said.

At the town level, Mr. Russell called the plan premature, saying the county is taking action on an issue when it hasn’t yet “identified the scope, scale or causes of the problem or solutions.”

“[Additionally,] people who live in sewer districts are already paying a premium to pay for their septic waste,” the supervisor said. “They already have public water and the county is asking them to pay twice. All they’ve done is found a neat, new way of creating a new tax without calling it a tax.”



Bill Toedter, president of the nonprofit North Fork Environmental Council, agreed with those concerns, saying that adding fees only to public water ratepayers and not those on private wells “brings into question whether this is totally fair.”

He also noted concerns over how the monies will be managed, pointing to a previous flap in which \$29 million from a sales tax aimed at improving water quality was used to balance the budget. Following a 2014 lawsuit from the Long Island Pine Barrens Society, the county was ordered to repay those funds to its Drinking Water Protection Program.

“Both the Suffolk County Water Authority and the county have shown in the past not to be the most trusted parties when it comes to getting in monies targeted only for water quality issues,” Mr. Toedter said.

Mr. Bellone said Monday that measures will be taken to assure the money can only be used for its intended purposes.



Group for the East End president Bob DeLuca, who attended Monday’s announcement, said there are always concerns about how the money earmarked for environmental issues is managed, but he believes the county understands the importance of using these funds for water quality initiatives this time around. He called the county executive’s proposal a “good and important first step” and expressed confidence in East End county legislators Al Krupski (D-Cutchogue) and Bridget Fleming (D-Noyac) to look out for the best interests of their constituents as the bill moves forward.

“The Legislature will want to put its signature on this in some way and I know Al and Bridget are already looking at [nitrogen pollution] issues,” said Mr. DeLuca, who added that his group will spend much of the next six weeks reviewing the proposal.

Mr. DeLuca pointed to more regionally specific water quality improvement districts within the county, the creation of town-specific stormwater runoff plans and offering more affordable residential advanced wastewater treatment alternatives as future steps local governments can take to improve water quality within the region.



Pine Barrens Society executive director Richard Amper, who also stood by Mr. Bellone Monday, said he’s confident Suffolk voters will support the referendum should it appear on the ballot this year.

“Not fixing [the issue] is simply a failure that we cannot tolerate,” he said.