

## Suffolk wants to add water usage fee to fund nitrogen effort

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By Jennifer Barrios



A home on the shore of Peconic Bay in Flanders still uses a septic tank. Nitrogen from homeowners' septic systems are damaging Long Island waters, experts and officials say. Photo Credit: Joseph D. Sullivan

Suffolk County wants to impose an annual fee on water usage to fund a new countywide district that would attempt to reduce nitrogen pollution from thousands of homes that aren't on sewers.

Under the proposal, to be announced Monday, all Suffolk residents served by public-water supply would pay a fee of \$1 per 1,000 gallons used, officials said. The county estimates the typical family of four uses 200 gallons per day, which would translate to an extra \$73 per year that a household would pay.

The county plans to hold a public referendum in November asking voters to approve the water quality protection fee, and Suffolk officials said they are seeking to get state legislation passed to get the measure on the ballot.

If voters approve the measure, the county would set up a countywide Water Quality Protection District, said Peter Scully, deputy county executive for administration.

The surcharge, which county officials expect would add up to nearly \$75 million a year, would be collected by water districts and channeled into a special water quality protection fund beginning in 2018. The surcharge would not expire.

## Long Island



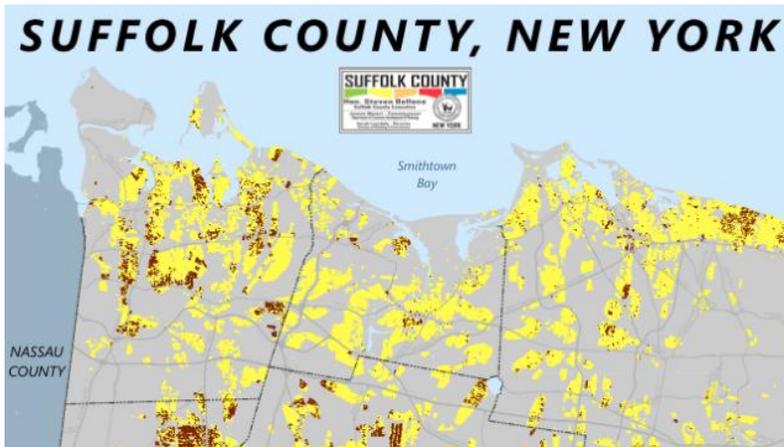
“We all understand what the problem is,” said County Executive Steve Bellone, who has called nitrogen “public water enemy number one” in the county. “Now voters should get to decide whether they want to invest a little to help protect our water quality.”

Experts say excess nitrogen is the cause of several negative effects seen in Long Island’s waterways — such as decreased oxygen levels, an increase in harmful algal blooms, the closure of shellfish beds and a reduction in eelgrass and coastal marshes, which are considered critical in buffering coasts from the effects of storm surges and erosion.

County officials have been pitching the district plan to environmental, construction and planning groups, in addition to state and county legislators and the Suffolk County Water Authority — the largest water provider among the 10 local public water districts and two federal public water suppliers in Suffolk.

Adrienne Esposito, executive director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment, said passage of the measure is crucial.

“It’s imperative that it’s successful,” she said. “Water is the heart of our island. Clean water protects our health, fuels our economy and makes our island sustainable. So we should be putting some money away to ensure our clean water needs. And this is a logical, pragmatic way to do that.”



But some — including a county legislator — questioned the need for an additional fee on county taxpayers.

“I have no intention of supporting something like that,” said Suffolk Legis. Thomas F. Barraga (R-West Islip). “That’s another burden on the average family, which they cannot afford.”

The fund would be directed in several ways — all with the goal of reducing the amount of nitrogen entering groundwater and surface water from the roughly 360,000 septic systems and cesspools in Suffolk County.

“It gives us an ability that we have never had before, which is to have a recurring stable revenue source with the intent of connecting residents and businesses to either sewers or other active treatment systems,” said Jon Schneider, deputy county executive for intergovernmental affairs. “That will go an enormous way toward allowing us to go to other levels of government asking for funding, when we can demonstrate to them a commitment from Suffolk County residents.”

Scully, the former regional director for the state Department of Environmental Conservation who was hired by the Bellone administration last year to oversee the county’s efforts to expand its sewer system, outlined the proposal in an interview with Newsday last week.



According to a draft copy of the proposal:

- At least 30 percent of the money would go toward grants and low-interest loans to help homeowners replace aging cesspools with updated technology that treats waste to remove nitrogen.
- Another 30 percent or more would go toward funding cluster systems — smaller, community-based wastewater treatment systems — in addition to wastewater infrastructure, including subsidizing the cost of hooking up homes to sewer lines.
- Ten percent or more would be directed to the wastewater-upgrade needs of towns and villages.
- An additional 2.5 percent would be left to the water utilities to cover the administrative expenses of collecting the surcharge, which has no expiration date.
- The rest of the money would go to managing the inspections and maintenance of the new septic technology, in addition to public-education programs and a local comprehensive groundwater and surface-water plan.

An advisory committee, which would include representatives from the 10 towns, would make suggestions to the county on how the fund should be used, but the county executive's office would create the annual budget for the fund and the county legislature would approve it.

Scully said decisions on where the county should direct its efforts would be guided by the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan, a \$5 million state-funded effort to gather data and make science-based recommendations on targeting the areas most affected by nitrogen pollution.

While the new fund won't cover all the county's sewer-treatment needs, it's a start, Scully said.

"It's \$75 million a year more than we are able to invest now," he said. "It will provide resources to address both active treatment systems at individual homes and to advance sewer projects that are long stalled."

If voters approve the surcharge, county officials would spend next year drawing up the agreements with the water providers and creating the countywide district, Scully said.

While that district could be created without voter approval, it would be subject to a permissive referendum — meaning voters could petition for it to be placed on the ballot as well, he said.

Jeffrey Szabo, chief executive of the Suffolk County Water Authority, said he has had "brief discussions" with county officials about the idea.

“We all support protecting our county’s drinking water,” Szabo said in a statement. “However, any proposal would need to be fully vetted by the authority’s board and our bond counsel before a decision on the proposal is made.”

The recommendation to create a countywide district to tackle the problem of upgrading thousands of septic systems and cesspools — which dispose of waste, but do not treat it to remove nitrogen — was contained in the county’s revised Comprehensive Water Resources Management Plan, released last year.

That plan, which had last been updated in 1987, is a blueprint for the county’s future actions around water issues. It found that 70 percent of the nitrogen in the area’s surface waters comes from wastewater, including septic and cesspools.

Scully said both the district and the funding mechanism were crucial to implementing the plan.

“They are cornerstones of the solution,” he said.

Schneider said the county always planned on getting permission from the voters.

“There’s no version of this that we’ve looked at that didn’t include going to the voters,” he said. “If you’re going to try to do something on this scale, you need to level with the voters about what the problem is, what the solution is — that it’s really a problem that faces every Suffolk County resident.”

Sen. Kenneth LaValle (R-Port Jefferson), who sits on the Senate’s Environmental Conservation Committee, was not immediately available for comment last week. County officials said they hope he will carry the legislation in the State Senate.

Senate Majority Leader John J. Flanagan (R-East Northport) and state Sen. Carl Marcellino (R-Syosset) did not offer any comment last week.

Assemb. Steven Englebright (D-Setauket), who chairs the Assembly’s Environmental Conservation Committee, said the idea is “worthy of consideration.”

“I’d like to see our ground and surface waters cleaned up. And I think that the motivation comes from a pure place for a pure purpose,” he said. “The devil’s in the details. I’d like to see the details.”

The nitrogen targeted by the plan enters the groundwater, which is the sole source of drinking water for the county. All water is treated to reduce and remove nitrogen and other contaminants before it is delivered to the public.

The problem of excess nitrogen affects all county residents, whether they are on a cesspool or connected to a sewer system, Schneider said.

“Wherever you live, we all go to the beach, we enjoy the Great South Bay, we enjoy the Sound, we enjoy the Peconic Bay,” Schneider said. “These are Suffolk County resources. And so I think the solution has to be something where we’re all in it together and the voters are signing off on it.”

The proposal comes as Suffolk implements a plan to expand sewers along the South Shore in areas critically impaired by nitrogen pollution, such as the Forge River.

The county was promised \$383 million in federal grants and state low-interest loans to do the work, which includes expanding the Southwest Sewer District.

Brookhaven Town Supervisor Ed Romaine said he was “pleased” to hear of the county’s proposal.

“Nitrogen is a big issue. How we raise the money to solve it is one of those questions that the county executive is trying to answer,” he said. “People will agree or disagree, but at least he’s put forward a program. If there’s a better idea out there, I’m still waiting for it.”

John Cameron, chairman of the Long Island Regional Planning Council, said his organization “strongly supports” the county’s initiative.

“If we had more upgraded on-site systems or even expanded sewer systems in downtowns, we’re going to be able to grow our economy,” he said. “It’s environmental, and it also allows economic development.”

Riverhead Town Supervisor Sean Walter called the idea “a good first start,” but said he thought the proposal likely would be changed.

“This is a good volley coming out of the gate here,” Walter said. “I’m happy to jump on board. But again, there are questions that we’re going to find answers to.”

Supporters, such as Kevin McDonald, conservation finance and policy adviser for The Nature Conservancy on Long Island, say everyone benefits when county residents upgrade their cesspools or connect to sewers — and everyone pays when the outdated systems stay in place.

“Right now we’re paying for a degraded environment and degraded water and degraded bays and harbors by not being able to swim or fish or enjoy them the way we used to,” he said. “If we don’t make the investments to recover them,

we're going to pay one way or another. I'd rather pay and have those systems restored than get away cheap with the way we're managing our waste."

But Paul Sabatino, former deputy county executive for Suffolk County and former counsel to the county legislature, called the plan "another one of those gimmicks."

"It's a crazy idea. It's like taxing water," Sabatino said. "Water is just one of those things — it's like taxing the air that you breathe."

Sabatino represented the Long Island Pine Barrens Society in two suits against Suffolk County over the diversion of money from a quarter-cent sales tax intended to protect drinking water that was approved by voters in 1987. Both Bellone and former County Executive Steve Levy had used money from the fund to offset budget deficits.

Sabatino said he wasn't sure voters could trust that the county would use the new fund for its intended purpose.

"There's a bad feeling out there that even when the voters adopted a referendum on a quarter-percent sales tax to spend the money on a specific formula, politicians . . . did different things with it," he said.

### **Suffolk County's proposed Water Quality Protection District**

- Voters will be asked in November to approve \$1 per 1,000 gallon surcharge on water for a Water Quality Protection Fee
- The fee, which would begin to be collected in 2018, would go into a Water Quality Protection Fund to upgrade cesspools and connect homes to sewers, among other measures.
- If voters approve the fee, the county will begin creating a Water Quality Protection District in 2017.
- That district would be subject to a permissive referendum, meaning voters could petition to place it on the ballot.