



**Nancy Rauch Douzinas**

President, Rauch Foundation

## Restoring Long Island's Water

Posted: 10/06/2014 4:38 pm EDT | Updated: 10/06/2014 4:59 pm EDT

There is arguably nothing more important to Long Island's future than our water: drinking water, ponds, bays and shorefront. All are being damaged by pollution, yet the political will to address the problem has been missing at the state level. It's become customary in American politics to put off tough decisions until after elections. Now is the time to let candidates in the November elections know that we want action on this issue before the end of the year.

The problem is that Long Island's groundwater has become contaminated. That's the water found underground - in cracks and crevices in the soil, sand and rock - that recharges our rivers, lakes, and wetlands, as well as our wells. It's stored in geological formations called aquifers, and on Long Island those aquifers provide 100% of our drinking water.

The problem, which is island-wide, stems primarily from nitrogen contamination from human waste or fertilizers and secondarily from pesticides and toxic chemicals. A major factor is that 70% of Suffolk County lacks a sewer system and relies instead on often-failing cesspools or septic tanks that discharge into the groundwater. While 70% of Nassau County has sewers, Nassau faces saltwater intrusion from over-pumping and the threat that temporary needs of New York City may re-open Queens wells, further depleting aquifers supplying the western part of the county.

The contamination has grown to the point where those aquifers are in great jeopardy. That puts at risk our health and all of our water-related economic activity: fishing, boating, going to the beach, and all of the restaurants, stores, tax revenues, and even property values, that depend on Long Island's legendary environment and renowned vacation areas.

Our upper glacial aquifer can essentially no longer be used for drinking water. Nitrogen levels in the Magothy aquifer, from which most of our drinking water comes, [jumped](#) 200 percent between 1987 and 2005, according to the latest available data.

All of the estuaries surrounding Long Island have been deemed impaired. Nitrogen-fueled red tides, brown tides, and rust tides are becoming increasingly frequent and severe - spoiling the quality and appeal of our waterways.

Nitrogen also destroys the marshes, wetlands, and coastal vegetation crucial to protecting Long Island from storm damage. According to [Newsday](#), the sea grass in Suffolk County's waters "has declined from 220,000 acres in 1930 to fewer than 30,000 today."

# HUFFPOST NEW YORK

---

## THE BLOG

*Featuring fresh takes and real-time analysis from HuffPost's signature lineup of contributors*

---

Fortunately, the problem can be corrected. The groundwater will repair itself if the contaminants are removed. But the more severe the problem becomes, the greater the danger to our health and economy and the harder it is to fix.

That's why four environmental groups - The Nature Conservancy, Long Island Pine Barrens Society, Citizens Campaign for the Environment, and Group for the East End - came together to form the Long Island Clean Water Partnership. It's why more than 100 Long Island organizations and businesses have now joined them in this partnership. Together they are leading a public awareness campaign, which the Rauch Foundation is helping to fund, to fix this problem once and for all.

The solution is to set state standards for nitrogen discharges on Long Island, phase in penalties for violations, and identify an agency to enforce the standards. Legislation was introduced last spring in the State Legislature to do just that.

The legislation - known as the Long Island Water Quality Control Act - passed the Assembly overwhelmingly (112-24). All of Long Island's state senators publicly stated that they would support the bill if it came to a vote in the senate, which typically would ensure speedy passage. But a vote never came.

That's unfortunately how Albany works. What you see is not what you get.

Forces that do not want standards enforced, even if that means making Long Islanders sick and damaging our economy, ruled the day. They do not want to pay even a short-term cost that will ensure the long-term environmental and economic health of our region.

That's why it's so important for Long Islanders to talk with candidates now running for office. Ask them if they will put the health of Long Island, its environment, and its economy first. Or if they will let special interests rule the day.

Ask them if they will support reconvening the State Legislature after the November elections - a likely event for other reasons - and if they will support the passage of this legislation then.

Now is the time to know. It's our health, our environment, and our economy that is at risk. Our elected officials should be prepared to stand up for us.

*Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Garden City-based [Rauch Foundation](#).*