

EDITORIAL

Cast bread upon the waters

Polluted wells, dead fish, closed beaches . . .
We need lawmakers to push for major funding to clean our waterways and protect our aquifer.

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Every so often, ego clashes in Albany produce something good.

Late last year, State Senate Majority Leader John Flanagan (R-East Northport) started talking quietly about pitching a \$2 billion state bond act for water infrastructure.

Not to be outdone, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo put \$2 billion right into his proposed budget for 2017-18. That would require only agreement between him and the legislature, not the public vote needed for a bond act.

Not to be outdone, GOP Sen. Kemp Hannon of Garden City wrote a bill that increased the bond act proposal to \$5 billion.

Not to be outdone, Assembly Democrats proposed a matching \$5 billion bond act, sponsored by Sen. Steve Englebright.

The good news is that, after all this time, clean water is being showered with tons of attention.

The bad news is that, in Albany, attention in February is like snow in winter. It comes, but will it last?

A lot could go wrong. Another ego clash over who gets to play savior could scuttle one or more proposals. Details yet to be decided could be devilish. Backing big money for clean water could be a ploy to give both the Senate and Assembly delegations from Long Island a reason not to help Suffolk

County with its own proposal to fight the nitrogen pollution fouling our region's waters. That cannot be allowed to happen.

Underlying all that is that Long Island and New York State need every bit of the funding. Cuomo and lawmakers should keep his \$2 billion in the budget and also send a \$5 billion bond act to voters in November. It's a lot of money, but only a little more than the proverbial drop in the bucket of what's needed.

New York faces the largest need of any state for wastewater infrastructure — \$31.4 billion over the next 20 years, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency. The tab for drinking-water infrastructure is \$22 billion, the country's third-highest. Both figures, experts say, are understatements. Federal dollars, through the much-discussed \$1 trillion infrastructure bill, would be enormously helpful. Cuomo's money, to be paid over five years, plus a bond act, rolled out over a longer period, would provide a nice down payment.

New Yorkers — and Long Islanders in particular — have put their money where their hearts are time and again in voting to tax themselves to clean their water and preserve their environment. Now politicians are acting as if they get it, too. In 2015 and 2016, they approved \$400 million over three years for water infrastructure, and received many more requests for funding than could be met.

Suffolk needs assistance for its ambitious plan to help thousands of homeowners replace failing cesspools and septic systems, by far the major source of nitrogen pollution in Suffolk. Nassau has those same issues on parts of the North Shore, and also needs to come up with innovative ways to reuse treated wastewater that now is dumped in the ocean; in summer, when lawn watering peaks, the county removes more water from the aquifer than it returns.

Money also is needed to accelerate work on identifying new contaminants in drinking water, testing for them and setting standards.

Cuomo and lawmakers must specify the criteria for granting money. How much would be designated for different categories? What can Long Island expect to receive? Spell that out.

It seems likely some match from municipalities would be required. Expecting them to have some skin in the game is

OK. But there is hardly a county, town, city or village upstate or downstate that doesn't have financial issues, and money is hard to raise in the tax-cap era. So the match requirement percentages must be set thoughtfully so that cash-strapped municipalities can use these state funds.

That's where Suffolk comes in. The county plans to ask voters in November to institute a fee on water usage to raise revenue to help homeowners make conversions. The money would give the county the match it needs to tap into those state funds, bringing a much bigger return on its investment. But state lawmakers, some of whom are skeptical of the plan, have to give permission for the referendum to be placed on the ballot.

They must do that. Suffolk needs a reliable source of funding for years to come to fight the war on nitrogen. Its referendum combined with a state match would do that. Lawmakers cannot pretend to have helped Suffolk solve its problem if they refuse to let county residents vote on this solution.

By now, everyone knows the problems — dead fish, nasty tides, closed beaches, foul smells, vanishing marshes, contaminated wells. And everyone knows the answer — a sustained source of money spent wisely with continual maintenance and adaptations to new technology. Not enough has been done, and all of us have paid the price.

It's time to put egos and politics aside. The proposals that have been made are an ambitious and promising start. But they will mean nothing if our leaders don't follow through.

Clean water, it's worth the effort.

