

A smart start to tackle Suffolk nitrogen pollution

Sometimes slow and steady wins the race. That's the principle behind a pilot program by Suffolk County to replace some 550 failing cesspools and septic systems over the next three years. It's a drop in the bucket compared with the 360,000 homes in Suffolk with such systems that contribute to the vast majority of the nitrogen polluting the county's waterways. And it's a much more modest proposal than the one Suffolk tried to rush in the spring that called for a public referendum on charging for water usage as a way to fund thousands of replacement systems.

But we like this new proposal. It allows the county to start making progress on a big problem while showing skeptical lawmakers and the public how the more ambitious plan would work. Each program would offer grants and low-cost loans to help homeowners switch to new high-tech wastewater systems. But instead of asking lawmakers and taxpayers to approve a hurried referendum without knowing all the details, this time Suffolk is seeking \$6 million through the state Regional Economic Development Council. That's a smart move, and the state should grant the request. Suffolk plans to pitch in \$2 million of its own each year, and also should apply for funding from a portion of the state Environmental Protection Fund designated for such a program.

The timing is good. Suffolk is testing alternative septic systems that greatly reduce nitrogen, and it should have a list of approved systems later this year. Having funds in place by then would allow Suffolk to quickly get its pilot project underway and build momentum in the fight to reduce nitrogen. That would be a good first step in a race Long Island cannot lose.

— *The editorial board*