

THE LONG ISLAND **Advance**

Calling for nitrogen protection zones

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Brookhaven Supervisor Ed Romaine is announcing the concept of nitrogen protection zones throughout the town in his swearing-in ceremony today. Referred to as NPZs, the areas would encompass land within 500 feet of local waterways like the Great South Bay and the Carmans and Forge rivers, with stricter nitrogen removal standards for new development than the 8 mg per liter that is currently accepted.

Brookhaven Town would set a nitrogen standard of .7 mg/L for cesspools or septic systems on any new construction on virgin land, construction that fully replaces demolished existing structures, or new construction or additions to existing buildings that are more than 50 percent of the original building. Once passed, the law would be effective Jan. 1, 2017, upon approval by the Suffolk County Department of Health Services.

“It will be introduced the following week with a public hearing either in February or March so the law can be acted on,” Romaine said.

With the county jumping on the bandwagon to clean up waterways which got a bump-up in October 2014 when Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced \$383 million in funding, mostly from Superstorm Sandy relief money to strengthen coastal resiliency, Brookhaven Town would become a leader in Suffolk to carve out a specific area for more effective denitrification systems that filter out nitrates before they flow into our waters.

But it needs county approval of systems first and, hopefully, some funding.

“Right now, a standard septic system for a homeowner costs \$5,000,” Romaine explained. “The alternative systems cost \$25,000. The county should not wait on this, because this will encourage people to get the funding and help reduce the nitrogen in the water.”

Romaine referred to a seminar held with then Peconic Baykeeper Kevin McAllister and Islip Town Councilwoman Trish Bergin Weichbrodt that dealt with alternative denitrification systems. “We tried to push the Suffolk County Health Department in that direction and they have yet to approve any systems,” he said. “They said they were working on it. [County Executive Steve Bellone] said they should have something in 2016.”

McAllister, who now heads up Defend H₂O, remembered organizing and hosting the seminar roughly five years ago at the Suffolk County Legislative chamber in Hauppauge. “At the time, we had been meeting to try to move the county forward to approve advanced septic treatment of nitrogen reduction,” McAllister recalled. “The seminar was well attended and I had a number of experts, including a representative from the New Jersey Pinelands Commission, another from Dutchess County and one near Syracuse. I led off talking about the connection between excessive nitrogen levels and how it’s affecting our drinking and surface waters.

“I’ve been meeting with all the towns trying to get them to adopt local laws like Brookhaven Town is trying to do. Under Romaine’s leadership, they passed a law that that affected the Carmans River in 2011 that if you build within the Carmans River Watershed you must incorporate an advanced treatment system that can denitrify the wastewater at three parts per million. That’s as good as it gets. Romaine is now bringing it to the household level for new development or rebuild. The town is saying .7 parts per liter; this is big stuff. I’ll be at the public hearing to push the envelope.”

Legis. Rob Calarco (D-Patchogue), who helped push \$18 million in funding at the time of Cuomo’s announcement to hook up 643 homes in Patchogue, said the county was close to approving advanced denitrification systems.

The county is currently evaluating three different systems in 19 locations to establish their efficiency, including one in East Patchogue, he said.

“We don’t have authorized systems yet, but we’re close,” he said. “We’ve been studying them for about a year and we want to have them certified.”

Romaine said he was hoping county grants could be applied for that would support advanced sewer denitrification systems.

Calarco said he would support sewer money going to advanced denitrification systems.

“I think it is something the county is open to, but we won’t be having a full-scale grant program until they are cleared by the health department; they’ve been under review for a year now,” he said.

Romaine reiterated that the law wouldn’t go into effect in 2017.

“If the county doesn’t approve our law, it doesn’t go into effect, but I can state clearly we want to reduce nitrogen in the bays and are setting the bar,” said Romaine. “Bellone is taking the lead in identifying the problem, which is nitrogen. We’re establishing a solution.”

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