

Town, County, Scientists Make Pitch To Governor For East End Clean Water Tech Hub

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Officials from Southampton Town, Suffolk County and Stony Brook University will make a personal pitch to Governor Andrew Cuomo for help in making the East End a hub for the study, development and ultimately manufacturing of clean water technology, for decades to come.

Staff from town Supervisor Anna Throne-Holst's office, Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and Stony Brook University professor Christopher Gobler, Ph.D. were to meet with the governor at his New York City offices on Thursday to present him with their proposal, in an effort to rally state resources behind an initiative to spur discussion and research of new water quality protection technology and attract private sector manufacturers to the East End region.

"We have a real problem but a shortage of solutions and we need to be doing a better job of putting our heads together to come up with new ideas," said Jennifer Garvey, Ms. Throne-Holst's deputy chief of staff, who the supervisor credited as "the brain child" of the proposal being pitched to the governor. "We have all these state resources and these fabulous institutions, Stony Brook, [Brookhaven National Laboratories], we need to get everybody to come together and see that there are specific technologies that need to be developed in short order and how we can bring that to fruition."

It's been three years since scientists from Stony Brook University, led by Dr. Gobler, issued reports that drew concrete connections between the byproducts of human waste, primarily nitrogen, seeping out of failing or ineffective residential septic systems and deepening water quality problems, made evident by the emergence and spread of destructive algae blooms in local bays.

The reports put the spotlight on the need to reduce the amount of nitrogen being released into local waters and spurred a broadening discussion of ways to address the problem. Southampton Town has pressed for a regional approach to finding solutions to the shared concern and presented the idea of a technology hub to Suffolk County officials last summer.

The main obstacle of the view of a broad solution thus far has been that the septic collection and treatment technology currently available is limited and those systems that approach the sort of steep reductions seen as necessary across a wide region are exceedingly expensive—costing as much as \$30,000 per property.

"The real key is that a solution is not a solution until it is affordable," Ms. Garvey said.

The vision, first, is of a rallying of resources behind a scientific incubator, to study and develop methods of reducing the amount of nitrogen that is released into the environment from residential waste. In the longer term the plan would then be to organize and incentivize private sector development of manufacturing facilities around the East End.

The private sector, on a national level, has thus far not been driven to put high levels of resources toward technological advancements in the field because the market for such systems is so fragmented by regional concerns and stringent and often diverging regulations.

"There is real opportunity in this because, oddly, there is this technology sector that is so underfunded and so poorly tended to," Ms. Garvey said. "The private sector hasn't seen a compelling market to try to capture. The markets are small and highly regulated and regulated differently in different areas, it's hard for them to see the profit. If we could create an area where there is... a real market for this technology, the private sector could take over. There are 30 million of these [outdated septic] systems in America."



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environmentalists and politicians hope to “revive and restore” the area’s sea life — and those whose jobs depend on it.

Last month, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced major funding for the plant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and federal community development block grants. The total that has been allocated to repairing and upgrading the plant, Cuomo said, is now \$810 million, but he estimated that extending the outfall pipe would run another \$600 million to \$700 million.

Cuomo, who issued a statement requesting additional funding for the facility from the federal government, said that there is an opportunity to “significantly improve the water quality and resiliency” of the waterways near the

High levels of nitrogen have been found in those waterways, which allow algae to grow unchecked, depleting the water of oxygen and killing off marine life. Extending the pipe, Cuomo said, would also protect marshland from nitrogen-induced damage.

“Reducing nitrogen and extending the outfall pipe is critical for protecting our salt marshes and the backyards of our communities,” said Rob Walsh, president of Operation Stop Polluting Littering And Save Harbors, or SPLASH. “This project will not only revive and restore this massive area’s sea life, but also the economy to which it’s tied.”

Scott Bochner, founder of the Sludge Stoppers Task Force, said that now is the time to upgrade the facility to extend the outfall pipe, which would reduce the nitrogen level in nearby waterways. “To live on Reynolds Channel and not be able to swim in it,” Bochner said, “to watch the marshes crumble, to witness seaweed growing eight feet thick, to view fish and wildlife dying, has been tragic.”

According to Cuomo, engineering designs and bid packages have been prepared for the initial, major components of the plant’s rehabilitation program, including the electrical distribution system and protective perimeter levees. Further efforts are under way to repair 31 major pumps to avoid the recurrence of sewage overflows into residential communities that took place near the plant after Sandy.

Cuomo said he has directed the New York State Environmental Facilities Corporation to work with Nassau County to make interest-free loans available so the county can undertake all repair and resiliency work as soon as possible. The \$810 million in federal funds will be provided as reimbursement for completed projects.

Nassau County Executive Ed Mangano seconded Cuomo’s sentiments on extending the outfall pipe. “We will continue to work with our state and federal officials to make this dream a reality,” he said, “and ensure the long-term health of the Western Bays for future generations.”