

RIVERHEAD NEWS-REVIEW

County water deal to go to voters in November

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County legislators voted overwhelmingly last week to let Suffolk voters decide the fate of a plan that would eventually replenish the Drinking Water Protection Program, which has so far been tapped twice for money to balance the county budget. If approved by voters, the plan would also allow the county to continue dipping into that program for several more years.

The plan — first announced by environmental leaders and Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone in July — would settle an existing lawsuit in which the Long Island Pine Barrens Society is demanding that the county repay nearly \$30 million to the program.

A referendum will now be held in November to determine if voters, who approved creation of the Drinking Water Protection Program in 1987, like the deal.

“That’s the most important part of all,” Dick Amper, executive director of the Pine Barrens Society, said Tuesday. “The responsibility for the Drinking Water Protection Program is set to be back in the hands of the people who created it in the first place.”

The Drinking Water Protection Program, funded through a quarter-cent sales tax in the county, has been approved through 2030. It is intended to protect groundwater through several specific avenues, such as open space purchases and a fund dedicated to stabilizing residents’ sewer rates.

In 2011, under the administration of former county executive Steve Levy, Suffolk used \$20 million in program money. For 2014, under Mr. Bellone’s watch, the county budget included \$33 million from the program’s sewer stabilization fund. That fund currently has over \$140 million remaining, and the agreement now up for vote in November would permit the county to continue using that money to balance its books, interest free, through 2018, after which mandated repayments would begin. The full amount of money taken from the fund would need to be repaid by 2030.

A proposal to amend the county charter to require voter approval of any changes to the program was originally tabled at a July meeting, which worried some environmentalists at the time. But it passed last week’s Legislature meeting, 17-1.

“By amending the charter, as opposed to passing a local law, in lawyers’ terms, that’s a higher order of law,” said Bob DeLuca, executive director of Group for the East End. “That’s something that enshrines it, almost like a constitutional amendment.”

As \$33 million from the sewer stabilization fund had been budgeted to be used this year, it remains to be seen what would occur if voters fail to approve the plan in November. Mr. Bellone’s spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

“By engaging Suffolk County voters, we will build the public trust and support needed to make sure we address our water quality,” Mr. Bellone said in a statement.