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Deal lets Suffolk borrow from water fund



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Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone at a meeting in Hauppauge on Monday.

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Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and environmentalists are expected today to announce a deal allowing the county to continue the controversial practice of borrowing from its drinking water protection fund for three more years.

The agreement also would provide nearly \$30 million in new funding for open space, sewer and other clean water projects.

The deal, which requires approval by voters in November, would settle lawsuits challenging the county's diversion of \$29.4 million from the water quality fund in 2011 under former County Executive Steve

Levy, and Bellone's plan to divert more money this year.

It also suspends a referendum drive that would have forced repayment of all funds diverted under the 2011 law at 9 percent interest and suspended the 2014 borrowing.

All future changes to the Drinking Water Protection Program, which was established to stabilize sewer rates and protect drinking water and is funded by a quarter percent sales tax, would have to be approved by voters.

Environmentalists argue that Suffolk has illegally tapped the fund to plug budget holes. Bellone has said he intends to repay the borrowing, which he called a last resort.

Bellone said the deal "moves the county to a strong footing

[with] everyone working together on water quality." At the same time, access to the \$140 million fund would help assure that Suffolk County can balance its budget without piercing the state's property tax cap, Bellone said.

"It provides us with some of the cheapest sources of capital," he said.

Richard Amper, executive director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society, which filed the lawsuits, called the agreement, "good for the people of Suffolk County. It contributes to a collective effort to improve water quality. That is everyone's job."

Two resolutions related to the deal were introduced yesterday in the Suffolk County Legislature. They will be heard at a legislative meeting in Riverhead on June 17.

One would change the county charter to require that the public vote on any future changes to the water protection program.

The second measure contains details of the deal.

The Group for the East End, a nonprofit environmental group, will suspend its effort to collect signatures for a petition that would trigger a referendum on forcing the county to repay more than \$53 million it has borrowed or plans to borrow, president Bob DeLuca said.

"First and foremost, this resolves the dispute over whether this program needs to be changed by the public," DeLuca said.

The money in the fund comes from a quarter-percent sales tax increase that voters first approved in 1987.