

EDITORIAL

OPINION

It's taxpayers' water fund

The Suffolk County Legislature has an independent streak that usually is refreshing. But some lawmakers now are being simply bullheaded regarding legislation on how to spend water-quality funds.

A deal reached by County Executive Steve Bellone and environmentalists resolved a dispute over county borrowing from the part of the drinking-water protection program that stabilizes sewer rates. Bellone wanted to use surplus from the fund to balance his budget, but environmentalists said voters, who set up the fund in a 1987 referendum, have to approve all changes. Part of the deal was to put a referendum on November's ballot asking the public to authorize a \$29.4-million bond to essentially repay an earlier raid and to give Bellone the right to borrow from the fund for three years with a mandatory repayment schedule.

The legislature in July approved the ballot referendum, but it tabled a companion charter amendment that makes clear that any changes to the program can be done only by public referendum. Huh?

There are cynical calculations at work here. Some legislators, from both parties, are balking at the amendment because they want to preserve the "right" to borrow from the fund even if the referendum on the ballot in November is defeated. Legislative counsel has advised lawmakers that such borrowing is legal — but that's what environmentalists twice sued the county over, leading to the deal Bellone made with them. Suffolk shouldn't go down that road again. And in the unlikely event the referendum fails — thereby denying Bellone permission to borrow from the fund — it would be wrong to go ahead and do just that.

The legislature votes today. It needs to follow through on the deal it made when it approved putting the referendum on the ballot: Only the public can decide how to spend money it voted to set aside. **N**

newsday.com

NEWSDAY, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2014