

EDITORIALS

Albany must seize bid to protect Island's water

After months of wrangling, two Long Island lawmakers have submitted a bill to the State Legislature to improve water quality on Long Island. It's not perfect but it's good, and it lays the groundwork for significant progress. Now it's up to the entire Long Island delegation to get this legislation passed and persuade Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to sign it. The issue is too important and the problems too severe to let the opportunity slip away.

The bill, from Assemb. Robert Sweeney (D-Lindenhurst) and Sen. Kenneth LaValle (R-Port Jefferson), proposes steps large and small. Most notably, it requires the state Department of Environmental Conservation to establish specific criteria — including acceptable nitrogen levels — for groundwater and surface water for each watershed. That's important, because challenges and solutions vary by area.

The legislation bans major repairs to existing cesspools, requiring instead new systems be installed that meet sanitary codes, and mandates nitrogen-removing systems for all new construction and major reconstruction and in priority nitrogen-reduction areas. This is more of an issue in sewer-deficient Suffolk, which already is exploring new septic technology and innovative ways for homeowners to pay for it.

The bill requires a report on pesticide contamination and a plan on how to deal with it, and it directs that guidance be given to farmers on reducing fertilizer and pesticide use, but issues no mandate. We support effective regulations that are not too burdensome to farmers. But this part of the bill tilts too strongly to inaction and might need adjustment in the future.

Could the bill be stronger? Yes. Could that bill be passed? No. Environmental battles seldom are won overnight. But this legislation is a good start toward addressing our water problems. Long Island's delegation must buck whatever political winds are buffeting the bill and pass it. Water is too important to the region to flush this chance away. **N**