

Schumer urges FAA approve airport land transfer to jumpstart sewer project

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U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer is calling for the Federal Aviation Administration to expedite their approval on the transfer of a roughly 25-acre tract of land at Calabro Airport in Shirley from Brookhaven Town to Suffolk County for the construction of a sewage treatment plant.

About \$300 million has been earmarked from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant funds from the Superstorm Sandy relief bill to cover the cost of sewer projects in Suffolk County. Roughly \$200 million will be dedicated to funding the airport project slated to service about 5,300 homes on the western banks of the Forge River, where county and town officials seek to partner up to reduce pollution, as well as to help businesses on Montauk Highway, allowing greater opportunities for expansion. In a letter Monday to FAA Administrator Michael Huerta, Schumer requested the agency fast-track their approval — a requirement because federal funding was used to make upgrades at the airport and the final hurdle for the project to clear — to keep the project's timeline.

Schumer said the FAA's approval must be obtained by this summer in order for the project to stay on schedule.

"That's why I am here in February, not in the summer, to tell the FAA to get the ball rolling, today," said Schumer at a press conference before a small group of community members inside the airport's terminal Monday morning.

The senator said that once the project is completed, it would improve the quality-of-life of residents, boost economic development, mitigate flood risk and reduce nitrogen levels in both ground and surface waters. Nitrogen loading alone in the Forge River watershed is about 229 pounds a day, but after the first three phases of the project are completed, the amount will be brought down to about 60 pounds, reducing pollution and preventing the further loss of wetlands, according to Schumer.

Sewer projects in other areas such as in nearby Patchogue have been heralded for dramatically improved downtown communities. Schumer said an expansion of the Mastic-Shirley business district would mean more jobs and more tax revenues, lessening the load on residents, and would protect against a future storm, not to mention reduce nitrogen loading. "It's a win-win-win-win," he said.

The FAA is reviewing the land transfer proposal, according to a statement issued by the agency Monday afternoon.

The proposed location of the new wastewater treatment plant and sub-surface leaching pools is at the southwest corner of the airport's property. As part of the county's plan, the plant will treat wastewater and then the sub-surface leaching pools will discharge the treated effluent into the groundwater. Suffolk County has submitted an application to take control of the land needed to construct the treatment plant, but it remains unclear whether the property will be leased or purchased, county officials said.

Town Supervisor Ed Romaine credited Suffolk Legis. Kate Browning and Town Councilman Dan Panico for their vision in pushing for a sewer project for the Mastic-Shirley area; however, he said it would not be possible without the help of Schumer in obtaining federal aid.

“We are deeply in his debt,” he said.

Panico agreed. “If the Mastic-Shirley area is going to grow environmentally, economically, and draw redevelopment,” he said, noting how Patchogue has improved with its sewers, “it is not going to happen without sewers.”

Browning, who has lobbied for sewers in the Mastic-Shirley area for the past six years, said the reasons for sewers have expanded since the massive flooding during Superstorm Sandy in 2012. When she first took up the issue of sewerage, the pollution of the Forge River was on the forefront, along with concerns about businesses being held back from expanding because of the lack of wastewater credits, but Sandy added another element to the equation when overflowing septic tanks and cesspools caused a spike in nitrogen levels in the water table.

“After Sandy, that justified further the need for sewers,” she said.

Citizens Campaign for the Environment Executive Director Adrienne Esposito called the desire for sewers a public issue and a lynchpin for the survival of the Forge River.

“We know the Forge River is dying — the science tells us it is because of [septic tanks] and cesspools — and the only way to revitalize the entire river is through sewer infrastructure,” she said.

Beth Wahl, president of the Mastic-Shirley Chamber of Commerce and the William Floyd Community Summit, said she is thrilled there is only one last hurdle for the project because of the amount of time it has taken for it to come to fruition. Wahl said the airport property was first identified as the best location for a sewage treatment plant when the summit conducted its own sewer study between 2003 and 2004.

“To see it finally get to this point, I am so excited,” she said. “It has taken all this time.”

Mastic Beach Trustee Maura Sperry, one of two village officials who turned out to support the sewer project, noted sewers could have helped reduce the environmental effects of Sandy, especially in low-lying areas like Mastic Beach, but that the systems are also needed to improve downtowns.

“This is very important for us as we move forward that we sewer our downtowns for economic development,” said Sperry, who is running for mayor in the village’s elections next month.

In a statement, County Executive Steve Bellone described his administration’s top priority as protecting the quality of the county’s drinking, surface and groundwater, adding that he has worked “vigorously” with Schumer and other leaders to “invest in wastewater infrastructure and technology in order to protect the region’s future from nitrogen pollution and potential future storm damage.”

“The full implementation of the Mastic-Shirley sewer project is vital in restoring our coastal vegetation along the south shore, which is essential to protecting these communities against future storms like Superstorm Sandy,” stated Bellone, who did not attend the press conference. “We are grateful for the senator’s efforts to expedite the transfer process in order for us to break ground on this much-needed wastewater plant.”