

[Editorial](#) OPINION

## Suffolk's water plan a good effort, but has holes to plug

Updated April 29, 2016 5:22 AM

By The Editorial Board



Excessive levels of nitrogen from sources, such as wastewater and septic systems, are harming the salt marshes on Long Island, including this one in the Otis Pike Fire Island High Dune Wilderness, seen here on Nov. 10, 2012, that are critical in protecting coastal communities from storm surges and flooding, the state Department of Environmental Conservation has said. Photo Credit: NPS / Diane Abell

Long Island has a nitrogen problem. It's fouling the water in which we fish, swim and play. It's seeping into the sole-source aquifer from which we drink. Reducing it is critically important to the region's future. That's going to take a lot of money, and there is not enough.

That's the context for an ambitious Suffolk County plan to dramatically cut nitrogen pollution. Big problems require big solutions. But solutions need details and must be vetted. And that process cannot be rushed. Alas, that's what Suffolk is trying to do.

The centerpiece of County Executive Steve Bellone's plan is an annual fee on everyone's water usage to help pay to upgrade wastewater treatment systems for the 360,000 homes not on sewers and to expand the area covered by sewers. He's calling for a public referendum in November in which voters would decide whether they want to pay \$1 per 1,000 gallons of water used. Bellone wants to take advantage of this year's presidential election turnout to get the measure approved. But Republicans who control the State Senate — the legislature has six weeks left in its session and must approve the referendum before it can be put on the local ballot — are loath to vote for anything in an election year that could increase the burden on taxpayers.

Compounding the politics, the plan lacks details. It's an intriguing concept, and it might be the fairest way to achieve the goal. But it needs a thorough analysis; hearings must be held and necessary tweaks made. When that's done, then it's time to schedule a referendum.

But the onus for progress also is on state and county legislators and town officials, who shouldn't dismiss the plan out of hand, as some have.

Participate in the process, propose your own ideas, help devise the solution. Thwarting action as a political reflex is not acceptable.

Here are some of our questions. The plan proposes grants and low-cost loans to help homeowners with cesspools and septic systems switch to new, high-tech systems. But what's the cost of these systems? What exactly is the mix of grants and loans? How will they be paid back and over what time? How much would homeowners have to pay upfront, and would assistance be needs-based? Installation of these systems would have to be mandated, with the high-priority areas closest to surface waters first. What locations top the list?

ADVERTISEMENT | [ADVERTISE ON NEWSDAY](#)

Most important, the estimated \$75 million in annual revenue from the usage fee must be put in the tightest of lockboxes and used only as voters approve. Bellone knows Suffolk does not get a pass on trust here; the county has raided environmental funds before to plug holes in its budget. And Suffolk's budget will be in bad shape for quite awhile.

There is great momentum in Suffolk to fight nitrogen, including a major expansion of sewers. Taking time to hone this plan will not dissipate that energy. Suffolk should welcome a careful evaluation and, for once, prioritize process over politics. Suffolk's voters will have the final say, as they should. And they have said yes again and again to paying to protect our environment. But their goodwill cannot be taken for granted. Give them the best possible plan and the information they need to evaluate it before asking them to opt in. Suffolk owes them, and our water, that respect. — *The editorial board*