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## *East End Asks For \$100 Million To Help Homeowners Upgrade Septics*

By [Michael Wright](#) Feb 18, 2015 10:19 AM **UPDATED** Feb 19, 2015 7:34 AM

Officials from the five East End towns have made an appeal to Governor Andrew Cuomo for \$100 million in state surplus funds, with plans to direct the money to upgrading residential septic systems in the region to combat water quality issues.

The East End Mayors and Supervisors Association, a coalition of municipal leaders from five townships and 10 villages, sent a letter to the governor last week asking that some of the \$5.5 billion in one-time surplus funds that the governor has said the state will have in its coffers going into next year's budget crafting process be used to set up a residential septic system replacement rebate program on the East End. It would be patterned on successful rebate programs on the South Fork in recent years.

Pointing to "alarming and increasing impairments" to local ponds and bays and marine species from toxic algae blooms, the association implored the governor to direct the funding to the estimated 81,000 aging residential septic and cesspool systems that are believed to be leaching nitrogen-laden wastewater into groundwater and surface waters on the watershed of the Peconic Estuary and the South Shore bays.

"The longer we wait," the letter says of the effort to reduce nitrogen loading, "the more expensive remediation will prove to be, if it can be accomplished at all."

Scientists have pegged high nitrogen levels caused by decades-old septic systems, which offer very little filtration between household toilets and groundwater tables, as the main cause of the explosion of destructive algae blooms that have beset local bays and ponds in the last three decades. Beginning to replace those systems, one by one, would be a significant stride toward reversing the swelling number of negative impacts seen in local waters, the group said.

"Our appeal on the East End is that ... we have these legacy systems that are failing and that are causing the degradation of the quality of our natural resources that are such a critical part of our economy," East Hampton Supervisor Larry Cantwell said this week.

But with upgraded home septic systems now costing between \$5,000 and \$15,000, convincing homeowners to make upgrades on their own is exceedingly difficult.

East Hampton employed a rebate program in the early 2000s to incentivize the replacement of underground heating oil storage tanks, a program that sparked the discussion of a regional effort with septic systems, Mr. Cantwell said.

In 2013, Southampton Town undertook a septic replacement rebate program, one that officials say demonstrated that homeowners are willing to tackle upgrades if some assistance is offered. The town offered to cover as much as 50 percent of the costs of upgrades, up to \$2,500. With just \$50,000 in the original rebate offering, the town was able to help only about a dozen homeowners make the upgrades, but response to the program was robust. In November the Town Board dedicated another \$100,000 to the rebate program.

In its letter to the governor, the association said that if the state was willing to direct \$100 million to a similar program, rebates of up to \$5,000 per household could be offered, coupled with low-interest financing to help cover the rest of the cost of installing better systems.

At those levels of funding, the group estimates that some 25 percent of households in the area could be upgraded. The upgrade incentives would be targeted to areas near surface waters and where groundwater flows the fastest into tidal estuaries. Local environmental groups have already begun drafting maps showing where reductions in nitrogen loads would bring the quickest returns.

"For something to have real teeth to it, it needs sizable funding," said Southampton Town Supervisor Anna Throne-Holst, whose office has led a push to establish a technology research and development hub in eastern Suffolk County focusing on water issues. Governor Cuomo pledged more than \$2 million in state funding to that effort last year. "This level of funding would mean recognizing that this is a crisis and that this is a way to start dealing with that."

As state lawmakers go into the 2016 budgeting process, they will find approximately \$5.5 billion in money from legal settlements with a variety of large banks and financial institutions, the product of lawsuits brought by the state accusing the banks of improper mortgage lending practices in the run-up to the 2008 credit crisis.

"The governor has made some proposals about how to use that surplus, none of which is particularly beneficial to Long Island," State Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr. said. "And he is soliciting other proposals as well."

State Senator Carl Marcellino has proposed that \$800 million be directed to water quality improvement projects on Long Island, and the East End officials have asked that a significant portion of that come to the region, since it generates such a large share of state tax revenue. The state will begin its budget negotiations this spring, and the budget will be adopted in early fall.