

Suffolk needs to sewer more of the county.

Cameron: Suffolk should manage wastewater

By: [Commentary](#) September 13, 2012 [Comments Off](#)



Long Island derives its drinking water supply from its groundwater aquifers. Protection of this treasured resource from contamination is critical for our public health and long-term sustainability.

With only 30 percent of Suffolk County's 1.5 million people served by public sewers (Nassau is greater than 80 percent sewered), the discharge of sewage from the more than 1 million unsewered population occurring from septic tanks, cesspools and other on-site sewage disposal systems is of serious concern.

Discharges from these on-site systems include nitrogen, pathogens, pharmaceuticals and other pollutants. Depending on hydrogeologic conditions, the groundwater contamination by these sewage discharges presents the potential for pollution of our bays and rivers or even worse, our drinking water supply.

The time has come for Suffolk to devise a way to sewer much more of the county and stop this onslaught of organic contamination.

This is exactly what County Executive [Steve Bellone](#) in conjunction with Suffolk Legis. [Wayne Horsley](#) and others on both sides of the political aisle are advocating. The problem is that sewers and sewage treatment plants are expensive – very expensive.

Much of the sewerage work done in Suffolk was funded 87.5 percent by the federal and state governments back in the 1970s and early '80s. That kind of funding no longer exists. Subsequent upgrades to treatment plants were funded to a large degree by the State's \$1.75 billion Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act passed by voters back in 1996.

Short of another shot of significant federal or state funding and under the county's present balkanized system of districts, major sewerage work in Suffolk will not occur. If a countywide district were to be created, an economy of scale could be attained that would allow the capital investment of the sewer infrastructure to be distributed over many more people than those in the immediate areas to be seweraged.

Bellone's proposal to expand the responsibilities of the Suffolk County Water Authority to include wastewater warrants serious consideration and vetting. It should be noted that all county residents can and will benefit from a countywide sewer district. First and foremost, the groundwater – our drinking water supply – can be protected for generations to come from not only future sewage contamination with all its sundry ingredients, but also from the toxic dosage of solvent chemicals that are frequently added to septic systems to relieve system blockages.

Secondly, for those residences and businesses in sparsely populated areas in which sewerage is not practical, septic management programs can be implemented that will result in routine preventive maintenance of on-site septic systems, thereby not only extending the useful life of the systems, but also optimizing their operations, thus minimizing the need for chemical treatments. Those in unsewered areas would pay a lower fee than those connected to the public sewer system.

Thirdly, the benefit afforded all county residents will be the potential to create economic development as well as next-generation housing in areas to be seweraged. Without such sewers, this development cannot and will not occur. The expansion of the county's tax base and creation of critical housing for our workforce along with an essential containment of the cost of government will enable the county, and in turn, Long Island the potential to become sustainable in the near future.

The recently completed LI 2035, the Long Island Regional Planning Council's 25-year sustainability plan, identified for reasons of economy, environmental protection and governmental efficiency the need for a more regional approach to the Island's water and wastewater infrastructure and management systems.

Suffolk County's initiative to start a serious discussion about the merits and challenges that accompany such a proposal is a smart idea whose time may finally have arrived.

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