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New Suffolk initiative aims to create countywide sewer district


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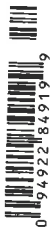
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COVERSTORY

FEELING FLUSH

New Suffolk initiative aims to create countywide sewer district

By DAVID WINZELBERG

Four decades after Suffolk County nearly drowned in the massive corruption scandal that surrounded construction of the Southwest Sewer District, the county has renewed efforts to expand its sewer network, laying the groundwork for long-awaited economic renewal of some of the area's underperforming business districts.

The ill-fated project that gave birth to Suffolk's largest sewer facility and South Shore conduits in the 1970s ran almost five times over budget – to more than \$1 billion – and was rife with fraud, payoffs and kickbacks, flushing the careers of politicians and public officials down the proverbial toilet.

For many years after, the stench of the scandal made county government gun shy about advancing new sewer systems. But recently, the growing threat of cesspool waste fouling the Island's drinking water, rivers and bays, the need for increased housing density and revitalization of commercial areas have spurred a new initiative to pump up Suffolk's sewer infrastructure.

Next month, the county will issue a request for proposals for a consultant to perform a study on creating a countywide sewer district. The goal is to spread the enormous costs of sewer infrastructure throughout Suffolk, an alternative to charging exorbitant connection fees that many residents and businesses in a smaller district just can't afford.

The effort teams the county with the Long Island Regional Planning Council and the state Department of Environmental Conservation and the study aims to evaluate the technical and financial implementation of such a countywide district.

The Long Island Nitrogen Action

Plan, funded by \$5 million from the state and co-managed by LIRPC and the DEC to mitigate nitrogen pollution that comes from septic systems, is giving a \$500,000 grant to the county to do the sewer study.

John Cameron, principal of Woodbury-based Cameron Engineering and chairman of the LIRPC, said because funding for any major public infrastructure project is its biggest obstacle, the financing denominator needs to be expanded.

"The direct beneficiaries and indirect beneficiaries of a clean drinking water supply, pristine beaches, safe fishing, as well as the ability to grow the economy is a benefit that's shared by all residents of the county," Cameron says. "In order to protect the public health, the environment and grow the economy, we need to manage our wastewater on a much more effective basis. To finance that infrastructure system, it will be cost prohibitive to the direct users of each system. However there are 1.5 million people in Suffolk County who are benefitting from protecting the water quality."

The study will identify taxes and sewer rates; evaluate unsewered areas; and identify environmental impacts of the water quality of rivers and bays. The initiative would prioritize areas where sewerage is necessary and in those areas where it's not practical, it will look to mitigate on-site septic systems with upgrades to innovative and alternative (I&A) systems.

The proposed countywide sewer district would have a tiered financing approach with different rates and allow each existing sewer district to opt in or out.

"If we want to grow the residential and commercial tax base, as well as build housing for our millennial workforce and empty nesters, we need to



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groundwater to Pul

Photo by Judy Walker

PETER SCULLY: There's a "tremendous amount of momentum" for sewer expansion.

have a public sewer system to manage that wastewater," Cameron said. "You can't count on the federal government. We need a financing structure that enables us to do this with or without state and federal grants."

Until the early 1980s, the federal government was providing as much as 75 percent of the cost of Long Island

Peter Scully, deputy Suffolk County executive and designated sewer czar.

Currently, the county has more than \$1.3 billion in ongoing sewer projects and sewer studies for other projects that are estimated at another \$2.33 billion, much of which it still needs to find funding for.

The county is nearing completion of

'YOU CAN'T COUNT ON THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. WE NEED A FINANCING STRUCTURE THAT ENABLES US TO DO THIS WITH OR WITHOUT STATE AND FEDERAL GRANTS.'

sewer projects. And though the current administration has promised a robust infrastructure bill, it's not clear when that will happen or how much money will be available for Suffolk sewers.

Meanwhile, the county has been advancing several new sewer projects recently and several communities could be awash in increased capacity for managing their wastewater.

"There is a tremendous amount of momentum right now, much more than there's been for the last 40 years," said

a 10 million-gallon-per-day, \$70 million expansion of its Bergen Point treatment facility in West Babylon. Construction on a related \$208 million Cross Bay outfall replacement project for Bergen Point is slated to start next year.

Additional major projects include a \$713.5 million sewer system for the Ronkonkoma Hub and a new MacArthur Industrial Sewer District that will serve Long Island MacArthur Airport and surrounding area; design work for a \$750 million Sayville extension that



JOHN CAMERON: Sewers are crucial to grow the residential and commercial tax base.

would expand sewer service for Oakdale, Sayville and West Sayville; and sewer expansions and treatment plants for the downtowns of Kings Park, Smithtown, Huntington Station and several other areas.

A nearly \$400 million plan for wastewater management improvements for the Forge, Connetquot, Patchogue and Carls rivers is also underway and being almost fully funded by post-Hurricane Sandy storm resiliency money from the state and federal governments.

The county's 18 current sewer studies reflect the need for billions in funding that still needs to be secured, but Scully

says Suffolk must be ready in case the Trump administration's promised infrastructure money becomes a reality.

"In the event that federal infrastructure funding becomes available, we want to be ready with initial designs completed so we can take advantage of every last dollar we can leverage," Scully said.

While some Suffolk communities have eschewed sewers for fear of greater development, others are hoping to get them to ease environmental issues and promote economic growth.

Beth Wahl, president of the Chamber of Commerce of the Mastic and Shirley, who has lived in the area for 45 years, said her community has been waiting for sewers for a while.

"We are in such desperate need," Wahl said. "It's not just for revitalization. It's for the environment and the Forge River. The river is dying."

Wahl said businesses there are also hampered by the lack of sewers.

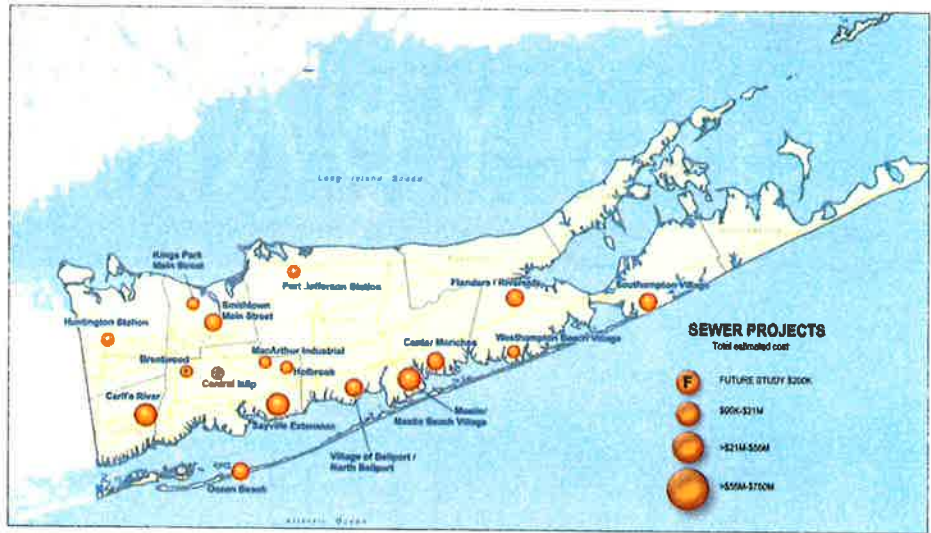
"We have the smallest Applebee's in the world," she said.

Wahl participated in a community visioning with Vision Long Island in 2002, where they identified the need for improved wastewater management.

"It's taken all this time," she said. "Elected officials don't move very quickly."

But it's more about finding the money.

Brookhaven Councilman Dan Panico said it will come down to whether people and businesses in the Mastic/Shirley

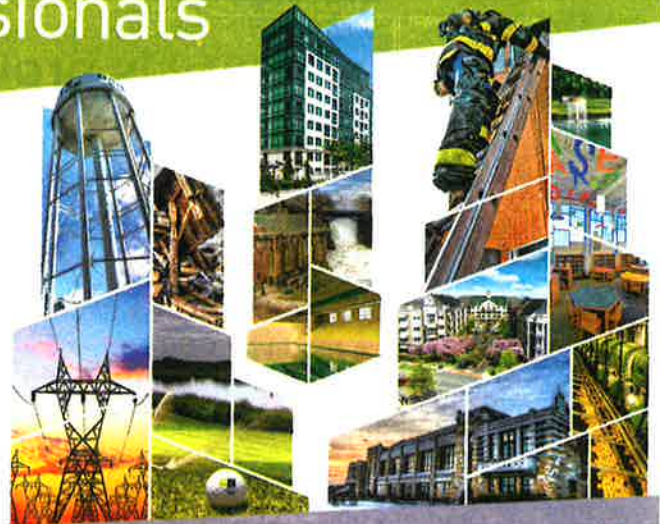


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COVERSTORY

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communities can afford it.

"A sewer district would have significant environmental and economic advantages for the area," Panico said. "It will create a separate taxing district and cost an estimated \$871 a year per household, if the county absorbs the connection fees. Ultimately it's going to come down to a referendum."

Panico added that he hopes the county shows the residents the benefits and the benefits to their property values.

"It will attract restaurant uses and add a vibrancy to the downtown business district like other areas where a sewer district exists," he said. "We can zone properties for the uses, but all the zoning in the world doesn't mean anything if you can't flush the toilet."

Scully agrees.

"Downtowns such as Patchogue, Port Jefferson and Huntington are all thriving because they have sewers," he said.

That's been apparent to Long Island's development community, which has been hamstrung by Suffolk's limited wastewater capacity, where only 30 percent of the county is sewered.

"If you're building in Suffolk County, the first question is 'How am I getting rid of the waste?'" said Mitchell Pally, CEO of the Long Island Builders Institute. "The answer determines what you can do. That's why it's become so important."

Pally thinks the county has been making a lot of progress on wastewater management lately.

"But we won't be able to make additional progress if another funding source doesn't become available,"



BETH WAHL: Businesses and the environment are being impacted by the lack of sewers.

Photo by Judy Walker

he says. "We are hopeful there will be a federal infrastructure bill that will include sewers. But sooner or later we have to make our own financing decisions."

And that's why the county, the LIRPC and the DEC are pushing for a countywide sewer district. The process starts next month with the issuance of the RFP to

hire a consultant to conduct a study.

"The county will petition the state to hold a public referendum to allow Suffolk County residents to decide if they want a countywide district," Cameron said.

"The people will decide."

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