

OPINION

SUFFOLK CLOSEUP

Tapping Another Source

The Town of East Hampton is moving ahead with a program to provide financial assistance to homeowners and businesses to upgrade their cesspool systems with new technology that drastically reduces nitrogen discharges.

It's a program that should be county-wide—and could be, through a bill authored by State Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr.

Some 75 percent of homes in Suffolk County use cesspools. This is problematic, because the waste they discharge sends large amounts of nitrogen into the underground water table. These cesspools are a major cause of the havoc with surface water, causing brown tides and red tides and otherwise setting off eutrophication.

But in recent years new sanitary systems have been developed that limit nitrogen discharge to extraordinarily low levels. The hitch is that they cost about \$15,000 each.

The Town of East Hampton is creating a program under which rebates would be provided—up to 100 percent of the \$15,000. The money would be obtained via a change, approved in referendums in the five East End towns in November, to the Community Preservation Fund program. First approved by East End voters in 1998, it has raised nearly \$1.2 billion so far to save farmland, open space and historical sites. The change allows for 20 percent of money raised by the CPF to be used for water-quality projects—including the new low-nitrogen sanitary systems.

The basis of CPF is a 2-percent transfer tax on most real estate transactions, paid by buyers. The CPF also last year was extended by 20 years, to 2050. There's no such program in central and western Suffolk County, although there was an effort several years ago to establish one in Brookhaven Town.

Mr. Thiele—whose district includes Southampton, East Hampton and Shelter

Island towns, as well as a piece of Brookhaven Town, plus East Moriches and Center Moriches and parts of Shirley and Mastic—has just introduced a bill to establish a county fund dedicated to water purity, so assistance for the installation of the improved systems would be available county-wide. Mr. Thiele, of Sag Harbor, has been central to the CPF since its outset. His new measure is somewhat similar to a proposal advanced by County Executive Steve Bellone last year. It also is predicated on a charge on the amount of water used.

However, there was resistance to the Bellone plan by some state legislators, who feared the money might be used by the county for other purposes.

Mr. Thiele's bill provides tight controls. The monies collected would be in a "lock box" for no other use and, as noted in the measure, monitored through an "annual audit by an outside independent agency." There would be a 15-member board of trustees administering what would be called the Suffolk County Water Quality Restoration Act. The board would work with an advisory committee. Moreover, the program would come into being only if voters approve it in a countywide referendum.

It would cover the entire county; on the East End, it would be in addition to monies provided by the CPF. Mr. Thiele says that even with the CPF, the East End needs all the funding it can get to restore and preserve water quality.

Also, he said, the state is "probably" going to allot several billion dollars to back clean water initiatives—so, with the proposed program, "Suffolk would be in a position to leverage and attract those dollars."

Under Mr. Thiele's measure, there would be a "water quality restoration fee" of one-tenth of 1 cent per gallon of water usage. The first 125,000 gallons would be exempt.

The amount of usage would be based on the records of the Suffolk County Water Authority and other water companies; in places where wells are used, a chart would outline estimates.

"It is estimated the fee would generate \$50 million to \$60 million annually for water quality improvement projects in the County of Suffolk," says a state memorandum on Mr. Thiele's bill.

The East Hampton plan, if approved by the Town Board, would provide 100 percent—up to \$15,000—of the cost of new sanitary systems in the construction of new homes and businesses, mostly in areas designated as water protection districts. All new construction and any house or business undergoing substantial expansion would be required to have the low-nitrogen systems.

"New construction, you've got to have new technology," said Town Supervisor Larry Cantwell in a discussion of the plan at a board meeting last month. Outside of water protection districts, property owners replacing existing cesspools would receive half the cost of replacement, and, for those with modest income, up to three-quarters of the cost.

Kevin McAllister, founder of the Sag Harbor-based organization Defend H2O, who has long championed the new low-nitrogen systems, said he is "very pleased that East Hampton has taken the lead on this" and sees the county overall as "making great strides" in bringing the new low-nitrogen systems to all of Suffolk County.



Karl Grossman, a resident of Noyac, is a journalism educator, author and award-winning journalist who has written "Suffolk Closeup," focusing on local and regional issues, for nearly

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