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Water Quality Now a Top Priority

BY JOANNE PILGRIM

Protecting ground and surface waters, and repairing damage already done by pollution from things such as septic waste and road runoff, has risen to the top of East Hampton Town officials' agenda.

A ballot initiative next fall, if approved by voters, could make millions available for water quality projects by authorizing the use of up to 20 percent of the money in the town's community preservation fund for such projects, and a town committee is developing a list of prioritized projects.

A host of initiatives, from septic system upgrades to the installation of state-of-the-art neighborhood waste treatment systems and barriers to prevent polluted runoff from reaching surface water bodies, is outlined in a townwide comprehensive wastewater management plan the town commissioned from Pio Lombardo, a consultant specializing in the area, and several pilot projects are under way.

But actions that don't require a financial commitment from the town can be taken in the meantime, Kevin McAllister of Defend H2O, an environmental organization, told the town board at a meeting on Jan. 12.

Last winter, Mr. McAllister presented the board with information on a Brookhaven Town law requiring advanced septic treatment to remove a higher level of nitrogen before wastewater is released into the environment, and he has been pressing East Hampton to adopt one, too. He was pleased to be told last week that an East Hampton version will be drafted and set for public hearing and a town board vote.

The law would require the installation of advanced septic treatment systems — those that remove more nitrogen than standard systems — for all new development that would result in an "intermediate" level of sewage flow, measured in gallons per day.

The standard would set the bar for environmental protection higher than is currently set by the Suffolk Health Department.

Mr. McAllister said this week in an email that setting a higher standard in East Hampton Town is "a great opportunity for East Hampton to really shine as a leader in local action." He said he hopes to persuade the Town of Southampton to follow suit.

Town Supervisor Larry Cantwell said at the board meeting earlier this month

that while some water quality protection actions "might be dependent on a revenue source that might be available after November," others "can be done on their own."

"You've mentioned one of them," he told Mr. McAllister.

"We look forward to having a more comprehensive plan of action," Mr. Cantwell said, "but there's no reason why we can't move forward."