

**Testimony of:  
Suffolk County Executive Steven Bellone**

**SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH  
SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION  
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION  
ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH**

**WATER QUALITY and CONTAMINATION PUBLIC HEARING**

**Hauppauge, New York**

**Monday, September 12, 2016**

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Thank you Assemblyman Englebright, Chair of the Committee on Environmental Conservation, Assemblyman Gottfried, Chair of Assembly Committee on Health, Senator Hannon, Chair of the Committee on Health, and Senator O'Mara, Chair of the Committee on Environmental Conservation for hosting this important hearing on water quality and contamination.

Today I am here to talk with you about the County's comprehensive efforts to Reclaim Our Water. While we are confronted with a variety of water quality challenges, from legacy impacts resulting from defense industry manufacturing, to pesticides and emerging contaminants such as personal care products, my remarks will focus on the need and our efforts to address nitrogen pollution from cesspools and septic systems.

It's easy to understand how this problem was allowed to worsen over the course of decades.

One editorial noted that "water pollution isn't a very spectacular menace. It builds slowly, it kills quietly, and it is easy to ignore—until it is too late. This quiet killer has destroyed valuable shellfish beds, and health officials at both state and federal levels have warned the pollution could menace human life.

Contaminants from cesspools are filtering into the underground water supply. In the face of this mounting danger, the county has no choice. It must have sewers."

Those words came from Newsday's Editorial Board, three months before I was born, on June 19, 1969.

When that editorial was written, more than half the clams eaten in the United States were harvested from the Great South Bay, and more than 6,000 Long Islanders worked the bay. Today, that iconic industry is primarily a memory.

Back then, the editorial board called it "contaminants." Today, we know it as nitrogen pollution.

The vast majority of nitrogen pollution comes from septic systems and cesspools on residential properties. Despite what we knew back in 1969, the reality is that today, nearly 3 out of 4 homes in Suffolk County are still unsewered.

At the time the editorial was written Suffolk County – under strong pressure from the state and federal governments – was undertaking a comprehensive, bipartisan effort to address the need for sewers, county wide.

Sadly, and in large part because of significant problems that arose when the County constructed the one regional sewer district that does exist here, those efforts were pretty much abandoned in the 1980s.

And the impacts that were predicted, if there were a failure to act, have materialized.

So, we know the problem.

But it is not enough to identify the problem, our job is to implement solutions.

There are some areas – primarily in western parts of the county where we can connect people to existing plants – where sewerage is a practical solution.

But there are also vast areas of the County where sewerage is not a practical or economic solution. And in those areas, the solution lies in the use of individual active treatment systems that treat for nitrogen, instead of cesspools and septic systems, which don't.

And we are involved in an aggressive, multi-faceted effort to set the stage for an evolution away from the use of the systems that pollute, to those that will help reverse decades of nitrogen pollution.

In the past two years alone, we have made more progress than had been made in the prior four decades.

For the first time, Suffolk County launched PILOT testing of individual treatment technologies to confirm their effectiveness so that they can be certified for use in Suffolk County.

Our work with DEC, the Long Island Regional Planning Council, and the rest of the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan team to delineate subwatershed boundaries so that sound, science based decisions can be made about priority areas that should be targeted for the installation of these systems.

Working with industry to ensure that it evolves and is positioned to provide trained and certified staff to install and maintain these new systems, and to take advantage of the economic activity that will result.

Enacting changes to the County Sanitary Code to create the Responsible Management Entity required under the State Health Code in order for the County to regulate the new systems.

All of these efforts are necessary to prepare for the historic change we must make to begin reversing decades of nitrogen pollution.

But it won't be easy. Policy makers will face some tough choices, and difficult decisions.

Requiring the use of these active treatment systems in NEW development will be the first decision to be made. And we will begin those discussions later this year.

What to do about the more than 360 thousand systems already in the ground, and whether some property owners should be required to replace their old systems, will be a more challenging issue. These will not be discussions for the faint of heart.

Regardless of whether the solution for a particular community is connecting to a sewer plant, or replacing ineffective individual systems with new technology, the cost to the individual property owner of making the necessary improvements is a significant obstacle that must be overcome.

A cornerstone recommendation of both the IBM Smarter Cities Challenge Report and the County's Comprehensive Water Resources Management Plan is the establishment of a new stable and recurring revenue stream to offset the direct cost to homeowners of the improvements, to make them affordable.

A recurring funding mechanism could also help to advance long stalled sewer projects in Smithtown and Kings Park, projects in Huntington, Oakdale and Sayville, to fund additional sewer connections to protect Northport Harbor, to support Supervisor Sean Walter's work to protect Peconic Bay and the effort to protect environmentally sensitive areas, led by Supervisor Romaine and East Hampton Supervisor Larry Cantwell.

Among the potential funding streams proposed in both reports is a fee based on water usage.

Based on that recommendation, earlier this year I proposed a public referendum on the creation of a Water Quality Protection fund. The Fund would be derived from a surcharge placed on water usage, collected by water suppliers, for the specific purpose of funding wastewater infrastructure to halt nitrogen pollution, both advanced onsite septic systems and sewers.

By collecting just one dollar per 1,000 gallons of water used for the Water Quality Protection Fund, we would generate \$74 million each year that could be used for one purpose and one purpose only, to expand clean water infrastructure in Suffolk County, to clean up our waterways and protect our groundwater. Even after adding this ability to protect our natural resources, Suffolk County water rates would still be 40% below the national average.

And to be clear, even an annual \$74 million revenue stream would not provide the resources necessary to solve what the IBM report noted is an \$8 billion challenge.

Now look I am not saying that this is the only way to solve the problem but we think this is one reasonable, approach to the issue given the magnitude of the challenge. This is not a problem that can be solved with one time grants of five, 10 or even 100 million dollars.

There may be other approaches that may realistically generate a recurring annual revenue stream of the same magnitude. And I have made clear that I am willing to discuss any alternative to our proposal that anyone feels is a better idea.

What we're not willing to do is to just pretend that the problem is less significant than it is, that it doesn't threaten both our environment and our economy... in short, to just continue on the course that got us here...by doing nothing.

I am ready to continue this discussion, engage our partners, and hear any alternate plan to take strong and decisive action. I am willing and eager to discuss any constructive suggestion to improve what this broad coalition has proposed to protect water quality.

I am calling on our State leaders to convene Federal, State, County, and local partners to develop a working group and issue a recommendation for a clear financing plan by the end of 2016. We cannot wait any longer.

Within my lifetime, we have allowed our water quality to worsen and ignored the warning signs that were so plain, even in 1969. I don't want to imagine what our island will look like 46 years from now if we continue to put off this issue.

We call this initiative Reclaim Our Water, because what was once great can be again. We know the problem, we know the solution, we have the will, we now need the financing plan.

Thank you.

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