

NEWSDAY

OpEd OPINION

Why we need stricter water-quality standards

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Waste water in the final clarifier tanks at the Bergen Point Treatment Plant, Bergen Ave., Suffolk County Department of Public Works Southwest Sewer District #3. (Oct. 13, 2006) Photo Credit: Michael E. Ach

With summer in full swing, what better time to remind everyone that we have serious water-pollution issues. While some politicians tout sewage treatment plants as the answer, they couldn't be more wrong. We need to seriously look at their poor-performance record, actual benefit to water quality and pretext for increased development.

There are about 200 plants throughout Suffolk County and more are in the works. I have periodically assessed their performance by reviewing monthly discharge monitoring reports. Those reports determine whether the facility effectively treats wastewater and complies with nitrogen discharge limits. They also ascertain whether Suffolk's Department of Health Services and the state's Department of Environmental Conservation responsibly enforce the permits they issue.

Although the plants have the capability to significantly reduce wastewater nitrogen concentrations, improvements to local water quality are usually not realized. Many of the plants are underperforming, while regulatory enforcement is lacking. Moreover, the plants are tied to dramatic increases in housing density, which increases nitrogen loadings to ground and surface waters.

Extending sewer lines into outlying areas leads to sprawl development that diminishes environmental quality and places financial burdens on government services and school districts. Suffolk County's ambitious plans for new sewer projects need to be carefully vetted to ensure water-quality improvements are a priority.

While small-scale private and municipal sewage treatment systems are tools in managing water quality, so too are alternative systems and new technologies that can attain higher nitrogen reduction. While Suffolk County is beginning to approve their use, it has yet to require them as a condition for approving new sources of effluent. Instead, the county health department's bureaucracy perpetuates the use of conventional septic systems, which collectively has caused the degradation of our waters. County officials need to stop dragging their feet and adopt stringent nitrogen discharge standards, including mandating the use of alternative systems.

More restrictive nitrogen discharge standards are important, and so is adopting numeric nutrient standards, which establish scientific-based criteria for protecting water quality and set the bar when developing watershed restoration plans. In 1998, the federal Environmental Protection Agency directed the states to adopt numeric standards.

New York State has developed numeric nutrient standards for certain water-body types, but its findings have not been released because of the objections from the agricultural and development interests.

In the absence of these standards, there is no certainty on water-body health and restoration goals.

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