

## Suffolk Posts Sweeping Plan For Overhauling Septics With Water Quality In Mind

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Suffolk County officials last week unveiled a far-reaching new blueprint for overhauling septic systems in hundreds of thousands of homes countywide at a cost of more than \$2.7 billion over the next 50 years.

Eager to get the so-called Subwatersheds Wastewater Plan off the ground quickly, the county says it will direct more than \$500 million in already allocated grant money to the replacement of 10,000 residential and commercial cesspools and other older septic systems through the installation of newer individual systems or expanding connections to municipal sewer systems over the next four years.

Ultimately, the county set a goal of converting all of the more than 250,000 cesspools and septic systems that were installed before 1973 countywide, either to new septic systems or to be replaced with connections to sewer treatment plants that scrub nitrogen out of the wastewater from toilets before discharging it.



The plan also recommends that the county implement legislation that requires that the most deleterious systems, like cesspools and the most basic septic systems, be replaced with modern systems whenever a property is sold or whenever an existing system has substantial functional problems.

In the last decade, marine scientists have tied increased concentrations of nitrogen seeping into local bays, through groundwater polluted with septic wastewater, to the explosion of destructive algae blooms in local waters since the mid-1980s. Individual home septic systems installed before the early 1980s are blamed for the bulk of this pollution and are mostly found in small shorefront communities, and largely in eastern Suffolk County, where sewer systems largely have not been employed.

“Scientists have warned that continued reliance on primitive wastewater disposal systems is a mounting threat to both our environment and our economy,” Suffolk County Health Commissioner Dr. James L. Tomarken said on Tuesday in a statement with the release of the Subwatershed Wastewater Plan. “Now, for the first time, there is a long-term plan to diminish nitrogen pollution and put Suffolk County on a path to cleaner, healthier water resources. The department appreciates the support and assistance it received from scientists, academic institutions and government agencies on all levels in completing this historic effort.”

The new blueprint maps out 190 individual subwatersheds for tidal waters and ponds around the county and prioritizes areas where upgrading septic systems will show marked improvements the fastest because of short travel times for groundwater flowing beneath homes toward the surface waters.

“The county has taken what may be the largest and most comprehensive water quality data set generated by any county in the country and has generated a robust, comprehensive and forward-thinking plan to restore Suffolk County’s most vital resource,” said Dr. Christopher Gobler, the Stony Brook University professor who has been at the fore of the effort to track and identify the causes of harmful algae blooms in Suffolk County over the last 30 years.

“While I have spent my career documenting the degradation of Long Island’s fisheries and aquatic habitats, it is inspiring to finally see a plan designed and implemented that will reverse course on decades of negative trajectories,” he added. “The citizens of Suffolk County will reap the benefits of this plan for decades to come.”