

# Suffolk pushes \$390M in spending for sewer expansion

Three proposed ballot measures would authorize \$390 million in spending to connect about 7,000 more homes to the Southwest Sewer District and create a new district in the Mastic and Shirley area.



The Forge River is seen from Montauk Highway in Mastic on Jan. 11, 2016. Photo Credit: Newsday / John Paraskevas

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A proposal for Suffolk County's largest sewer expansion in decades that could go before voters this January calls for \$390 million in spending to improve water quality, boost economic development and protect against storm surges.

But the plan also would cost property owners along the South Shore hundreds of dollars a year.

Three proposed ballot measures would authorize the spending to connect about 7,000 more homes to the Southwest Sewer District in Babylon Town and Great River in Islip, and create a new sewer district and treatment plant in the Mastic and Shirley area.

The state and federal money was announced by Suffolk County and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo in 2015 to [improve coastal resiliency](#) in the wake of superstorm Sandy.

The push for the ballot measures intensified in July, when the state agreed to convert \$60 million of the funding from loans into grants, reducing the amount residents will have to pay back.

State law allows a public vote on expansion or creation of sewer districts in Suffolk County.

Backers say the new sewer hookups will reduce seepage of nitrogen from in-ground septic tanks into bays and rivers, which can damage wetlands that serve as protection from storm surges.

Pollution from cesspools and septic systems also is blamed for rising nitrogen levels in surface water that result in algal blooms that harm marine life.

Sewers also would allow for increased economic development in business districts and spare residents from frequent backups and pumpouts of old septic systems, backers of the proposal say.

Costs would range from \$470 to \$755 for homeowners to pay for operation and maintenance and repay \$16.4 million in loans. Only those connecting to the sewers would have to pay.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said the projects would represent the largest investment in sewer infrastructure in Suffolk County in more than 40 years.

"These projects will have huge benefits for both the environment and the economy," Bellone said. "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to improve water quality by using post-Sandy grant funds to connect nearly 7,000 homes to sewers, eliminating thousands of polluting cesspools and septic systems."

However, some county lawmakers noted the cost to homeowners.

"The potential economic and environmental benefits could be tremendous, with regard to limiting the amount of nitrogen going into the Forge River and the bay," said Brookhaven Town Councilman Dan Panico, a Republican.

But “the cost is significant, and it’s incumbent on the county to get as much information out to residents as possible and to get the costs as low as possible,” Panico said. “People are going to be faced with an important decision.”

Suffolk County lawmakers voted unanimously Wednesday to schedule public hearings on the referendums for Oct. 2.

Legislative votes to put the measures on the ballot are expected this fall, according to a timeline presented to lawmakers.

Public votes to permit creation and expansion of the sewer districts in each area would be scheduled for Jan. 22, according to a presentation Deputy County Executive Peter Scully made to lawmakers last week.

Only registered voters in areas that would connect to the sewer districts will be able to participate in the referendums.

According to Suffolk's presentation:

- The \$191.3 million project along the Forge River in Mastic and Shirley would include construction of a new sewage treatment plant at Brookhaven Calabro Airport.

Nearly 1,900 residential parcels and businesses along with a commercial corridor near Montauk Highway would be connected to sewers initially. Eventually, the treatment plant would allow sewerage of an additional 10,500 residential units in the area.

The initial project would remove 201 pounds of nitrogen per day, a 15 percent reduction in the river's wastewater nitrogen load.

Property owners would pay \$470 a year.

- The \$140.2 million project along the Carlls River in West and North Babylon and in Wyandanch would connect 3,958 residential parcels to the Southwest Sewer District. It would remove 477 pounds of nitrogen a day, a 31 percent reduction in the wastewater nitrogen load for the river.

Property owners would pay \$532 a year.

- The \$26.4 million project along the Connetquot River in Great River in Islip Town would connect 457 residential parcels to the Southwest Sewer District. It would remove 41 pounds of nitrogen a day, an eight percent reduction in the river’s wastewater nitrogen load.

Property owners would pay \$755 a year.

As part of the county's overall plan — known as the Suffolk County Coastal Resiliency Initiative — the county also plans a \$29.6 million sewer expansion in Patchogue to cover an additional 513 residential parcels. But that project will not go before voters.

Residents there will pay an annual charge established by the village, county officials said.

Nearly 75 percent of homes in Suffolk County — about 360,000 residences — are not connected to sewers and instead rely on cesspools and septic tanks to dispose of their waste.

Plans to [expand sewers stalled](#) in the 1970s after the Southwest Sewer District became mired in cost overruns and scandals. Then in the 1980s, the federal government largely stopped funding sewer infrastructure.

The projects in Islip, Babylon and Brookhaven towns being considered now have been on the books for years. But without the federal and state grants, the costs had been deemed too high for homeowners pay themselves.

The proposed projects will use "low-pressure sewer systems," that include pumps in front of each house. That method of sewerage is cheaper and causes less construction disruption, county officials said.

County officials say they've begun meeting with environmentalists and civic groups to build support for the plan.

"It's an opportunity we can't miss out on," Legis. Rudy Sunderman (R-Shirley) said. "I can't tell you how exciting it is to have a chance to enhance [the] quality of life and environment in our community."

Civic group leaders near the site of the planned wastewater treatment plant in Mastic and Shirley said they opposed the sewer project because they won't be able to connect to the plant, despite living near it. They also said the project would boost commercial development along Montauk Highway, rather than sewer homes that are polluting the Forge River.

"It's more about expanding and intensifying the commercial use along Montauk Highway than it is remedying the Forge River nitrogen problem," said Raymond Keenan, president of the Manor Park Civic Association.

Beth Wahl, president of the Chamber of Commerce of the Mastics and Shirley, said the sewage project is a top priority for the group and will improve the economic health of the area.

"This will be the most important thing to happen to our community in many, many years. It's imperative we get these sewers," Wahl said.

*With Carl MacGowan and Antonio Planas*