

A30

Newsday

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

GORDON McLEOD *Publisher*

NEWS

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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Serious about clean water

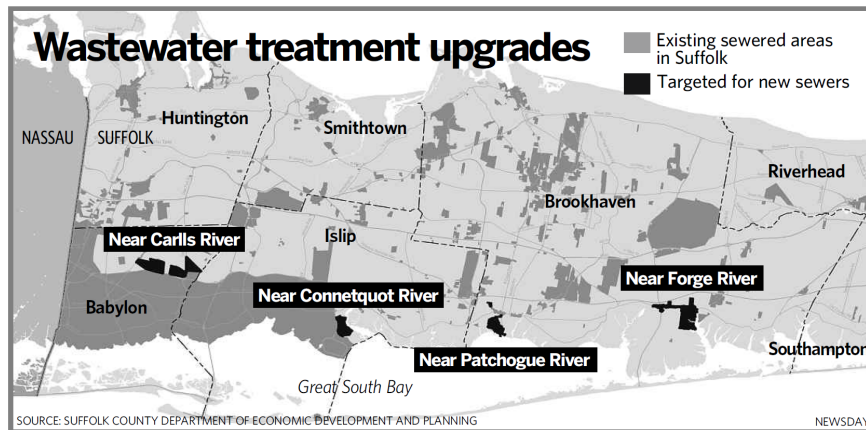
Finally, several new programs target the severe lack of sewage treatment in Suffolk County

Really big problems often lead to the old government three-step: Deny the problem exists, minimize its magnitude, reject responsibility to solve it.

But when it comes to the nitrogen pollution crisis that's killing our waterways, what's happening in Suffolk County defies the norm. All layers of government — federal, state and local — acknowledge it's a crippling problem. They've agreed they must help solve it. And, most impressive of all, they're actually doing something about it.

Much hard work looms beyond what so far are commitments, plans and blueprints. Diligence will be required to sustain the momentum as time passes. Still, 2014 has the makings of a watershed in the fight against nitrogen.

A year of mostly good news was capped by the announcement that Suffolk will receive \$383 million, most of that in federal Sandy-recovery grants, for four new sewer projects. It's the largest investment in clean



TO REDUCE POLLUTION: Four river watershed areas in western and central Suffolk are targeted for new sewer treatment to cut down on nitrogen that flows into waterways and kills sea life.

water infrastructure in the county since the Southwest Sewer District was formed in the 1970s.

The money will allow Suffolk to connect nearly 11,000 more homes, raising the number of sewered homes from 38 percent to 40 percent and reducing the nitrogen entering Great South Bay by 15 percent. Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and state officials landed the funds by showing that nitrogen not only harms shellfish and other marine life, it destroys our marshes, wetlands and coastal vegetation. Those natural areas act as storm protection by sapping wave energy and slowing them down.

The sewer projects will

focus on important South Shore river watersheds. Three will connect parts of North Babylon-Deer Park, Great River and Patchogue to existing networks. One will build a new treatment plant at Brookhaven Town's Calabro Airport and start hooking up the Mastic peninsula. The plan is ambitious and must be completed by 2019, when the funding expires. Focus will be essential.

Suffolk also is making progress on an equally knotty problem: how to reduce nitrogen emanating from inefficient and often-failing septic systems in the thousands of homes that never can be sewered in a cost-

effective way. The county will begin a pilot program in March to install new high-tech systems in a handful of homes. Some models will be approved and a financial mechanism devised to get them into as many residences as possible. Complementing that will be a new research center at Stony Brook University, spearheaded by Southampton Town Supervisor Anna Throne-Holst and started with \$2 million in state seed money, to develop the next generation of even more efficient septic systems.

Making costly septic system upgrades more affordable for homeowners will be critical. Assemb. Fred Thiele Jr. (I-Sag Har-

bor) has an exciting proposal. Thiele, architect of the fabulously successful Community Preservation Fund that's produced nearly \$1 billion for East End land preservation via a 2 percent tax on most real estate sales, is writing a bill to extend the program 20 years. It would use some \$500 million of that new revenue for high-tech septic systems, whether to pay for installations of community systems or to give rebates to homeowners for individual systems.

Another big funding opportunity will come in next year's budget process when Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and state lawmakers divvy up \$5 billion in surplus and bank settlement money. Such one-shot funding should be used primarily for transformative infrastructure projects — and Suffolk should get a healthy chunk to continue expanding sewers on the vulnerable South Shore.

We still need a Long Island water-quality bill, we still need to protect the Lloyd aquifer from increased drilling, and we still need to buy and preserve open space to help protect our waters. But the tide clearly has shifted in the clean-water battle. Real money is being spent and real attention is being paid. Now everyone involved needs to keep pushing hard, so 2014 becomes the year we turned the corner on one of our most pressing environmental problems. **N**