Water Quality Plan Launched

Nitrogen Reduction Strategy Underway

A program aimed at reversing the decline in water quality Island-wide, by targeting nitrogen from wastewater and fertilizers, is underway. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the Long Island Regional Planning Council have commenced a three-part program, supported by Suffolk and Nassau Counties and several Long Island towns.

Funded by New York State at $5 million for the first year, the program calls for identifying each of the Island’s individual watersheds, measuring the current nitrogen loading, then producing a custom, science-based Nitrogen Reduction Plan for each watershed. A second $5 million is being sought in the 2016 state budget.

Launched in October, the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan is aimed at reducing nitrogen discharge from sewage treatment plants, individual septic systems and cesspools and fertilizers associated with agricultural and landscaping. The nitrogen seeps into groundwater and flows into our surface waters, degrading drinking water and triggering harmful algae blooms that kill marine life and aquatic plants, closing beaches and shellfisheries.

At the same time, Suffolk County has launched a spate of initiatives, including testing new wastewater management systems in individual homes in an effort to replace some 350,000 home cesspools and septic systems over the next decade. These antiquated systems, discharge human waste directly into groundwater causing significant nitrogen contamination. Results of the testing are expected by summer and the approval of these advanced systems for widespread use is expected later in 2016.

Future water improvement efforts will include the reduction of pesticides and herbicides, clean-up of toxic waste sites and elimination of pharmaceutical drugs from groundwater through improper disposal. “We know exactly what is responsible for declining water quality on Long Island,” said Pine Barrens Society Executive Director, Richard Amper, “now, we’ve begun the process of cleaning up the mess.”

Environmentalists Attack Over-Development

High Density Re-zoning Comes Under Fire

Responding to a series of new, high-density development proposals requiring re-zoning, the Pine Barrens Society and other environmental and civic groups have begun an ambitious project to defeat currently proposed projects and prevent future ones.

Launched as a campaign to defeat the construction of a mega golf resort in the Pine Barrens of eastern Southampton Town, the project involves community organization, paid and free advertising and leadership from political and celebrity leaders.

Arizona-based Discovery Land Company seeks to build “The Hills at Southampton,” on some 500 acres of land that is a part of the Pine Barrens, mostly preserved land that is critical to Long Island’s hydrology and ecology. In fact, the area looking to be developed is the largest remaining tracts of Pine Barrens land that is still in private hands. The Planned Development District or “PDD” would include 118 residential units, a 98.13 acre private golf course, a 155,760 square foot clubhouse and a 4.24 acres and a 4.68 acre pond.

The proposed project requires re-zoning from the as of right, which permits only one house per five acres, intended to protect the underground aquifer in the Pine Barrens of East Quogue. The re-zoning mechanism is termed a “Planned Development District,” and “The Hills” is but one of several high-density development projects which Southampton has approved or is considering.

A full-page ad in the Southampton Press (see page three) was signed by more than two dozen community leaders including New York State Assemblyman Fred Thiele, and was then followed by a television Public Service Announcement, featuring actor Alec Baldwin. The public education effort aims to “Kill the Hills and Repeal PDDs.” More than 1000 Southampton residents have written town officials supporting the campaign.
AERIAL VIEW: Brown Tide being flushed out of Great South Bay through the new Wilderness Inlet, July 2015.

NEW INLET: Fire Island inlet, created during Superstorm Sandy, has improved water quality in Great South Bay. It had been almost two centuries since water freely flowed in and out of Great South Bay through Old Inlet, an undeveloped stretch of Fire Island’s barrier beach southeast of Bellport Village. But that all changed the night of October 29th, 2012, and since then the area is more commonly called “New Inlet.” After 3 years, the fear and uncertainty that initially pushed some people to call for its manual closure has faded, and now these same people can be heard saying that the New Inlet is the best thing to have happened to Great South Bay in their lifetimes.

Almost immediately after Superstorm Sandy carved the inlet through the Otis Pike High Dunes Fire Island Wilderness Area, the water in eastern Great South Bay (aka Bellport Bay) became clearer and saltier. Seals, river herring, and a variety of sportfish quickly became abundant; hard clams were (and still are) growing faster. On the first anniversary of Sandy, National Geographic Society called the new inlet “Sandy’s Silver Lining.”

On sunny days, the waters around the sand shoals and new islands ringing the inlet appear a turquoise that is more reminiscent of the Caribbean than Long Island. Families, paddle boarders, sailors, and fishermen flock to its clear, flowing waters.

This type of recovery has precedent; similar observations were made during and after the previous formation of other inlets along Long Island’s South Shore bays. Perhaps the most famous was the well-studied resurgence of shellfisheries and the disappearance of duck farm nitrogen pollution fueled harmful algae blooms after Moriches Inlet was re-opened in 1953.

The decision to (so far) forgo spending up to $20M on dredges and bulldozers and instead allow for the kind of natural sand and water flow that has shaped and maintained Long Island’s barrier beaches for thousands of years was not made lightly. The state/federal interim decision hinged on data from a network of water monitors that were in place before, during and after Sandy which invalidated unsubstantiated predictions that a new inlet was an imminent threat to life and property on the mainland. Stony Brook University’s Dr. Charlie Flagg and his team were quick to action in the days after Sandy checking sensors, calculating flows, taking aerial photos, and presenting results while many of us were still bailing out our homes and waiting in long lines for gasoline.

But the presence of a massive sand mining dredge off Ocean Beach Fire Island this fall is a poignant reminder that a final determination on manual closure of the new inlet has yet to be made. To that end, the Department of Interior is currently conducting an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) that should inform agency decision makers on the proper course of action before the end of 2016.

So far, against the odds, facts and data have been more influential than fear and speculation, and for this we can give thanks not only to the scientists and citizens who have been very active, but also to some calm and thoughtful agency leaders at New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and Department of Interior. However barrier island management remains controversial and the fate of New Inlet is still uncertain.

In the wake of Superstorm Sandy, Governor Cuomo’s 2100 Commission report pledged that the state would take a more enlightened approach towards managing for resilience and sustainability. How things pan out in this next decision making process will indicate if we have truly embraced the 2100 Commissions findings, or if the public’s agencies will fall back to the same old pre-Sandy paradigm.

The second winter of discontent is underway in the battle against the Southern Pine Beetle. The rice grain-size insects have attacked thousands of trees in the Pine Barrens and across Long Island. While the beetles cannot be eradicated, they are managed by cutting down infested trees—especially in the winter months.

To date, more than 7,000 trees (on approximately 100 acres) have been cut to treat for the Southern Pine Beetle. Treated areas include: Henry’s Hollow State Forest, Munn’s Pond County Park, Hubbard County Park, and private and County land east of Bellows Pond road.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation estimates the annual cost of beetle management at $3.5 million. Pine Barrens Society Executive Director Richard Anger, said, “The people of Long Island have invested nearly a billion dollars in land preservation – $3.5 million a year seems like a small price to pay for the protection of our water and forest resources.”

One plan advanced by the DEC calls for allowing commercial foresters to cut oak wood in exchange for cutting beetle-ravaged pitch pines. The Society does not support this approach.

The New York State Central Pine Barrens Commission’s funding for beetle management is insufficient to manage the infestation. The Pine Barrens Society is actively seeking support from state legislative leaders including Assembly Environmental Conservation Committee Chairman Steve Englebright, New York State Senator Ken LaValle, Assemblyman Fred Thiele and Governor Andrew Cuomo. Stay tuned.
"The Hills at Southampton," (see story on page one) is one of the worst development projects ever proposed in the Pine Barrens. It has become a lightning rod for opposition to over-development in the Town of Southampton. The Long Island Pine Barrens act as a natural filter, protecting Long Island’s aquifer, our main source of drinking water, from pollutants such as nitrogen. The property on which the project is proposed is also designated a Special Groundwater Protection Area by the state, as well as a designated Critical Environmental Area by Suffolk County. In addition, “The Hills” is part of a group of lands which The Nature Conservancy has given top priority for permanent preservation.

Development on this land will add to the total load of pollutants that are discharged into the groundwater and surrounding surface waters, which are already displaying signs of nitrogen pollution. The nearly 500-acre property would be located near Weesuck Creek and Shinnecock Bay which are currently exhibiting considerable evidence of pollution, including brown tide, red tide and rust tide.

Toxic algae blooms have closed beaches and shellfish beds that once flourished with clams and oysters. In May of 2015, shellfish in Weesuck Creek and Western Shinnecock Bay tested positive for saxitoxin, a marine biotoxin that causes paralytic shellfish poisoning, found to poison over a hundred Diamondback terrapin turtles on Long Island. Saxitoxin can also poison humans causing weakness, paralysis, or even death to those who consume high levels of this compound, by eating contaminated clams from Weesuck Creek for example. In June 2015, extensive brown tides appeared in Shinnecock Bay among other bodies of water surrounding Long Island as a result of extensive nitrogen loading. Algae blooms are responsible for the loss of eelgrass across Long Island as well as the recent fish die off in the Peconic Estuary. Sources of the nitrogen pollution can be traced to Long Island’s outdated septic tanks and cesspools as well as to fertilizer runoff from lawns, golf courses and agriculture.

In addition, the development applicant’s so-called “public benefits” are largely mitigation measures and don’t ring true. “The Hills” developer’s claim that their project would improve water quality is ridiculous and utterly unsupported by the facts. The applicant’s claims that their project would have a net tax benefit to the community is preposterous. Every residential project promises the same and none has ever done anything but raise taxes because of the increased cost of government services. Residential development never decreases taxes – ever.

In the interest of protecting water quality, the Town of Southampton zoned “The Hills” property for one house for every five acres. “As of right” development would comply with one house per five acres zoning. The golf course project would represent more intensive use of the land and much greater impacts from contaminants, including nitrogen and pesticides. The State Environmental Quality Review Act gives great latitude to the town to demand extra protection beyond usual levels where it can be demonstrated that the public interest (in this case, water quality improvement) is the rationale for more protective measures. Moreover, once the prospect of a mega golf course disappears, the sale of land for preservation becomes more attractive. The Southampton Town Board is free to reject the proposed PDD at any time. It’s time.
The Pine Barrens Society’s television program airs on Cablevision Channel 20 in the following areas. If your region is not listed here, please call our office at 631-369-3300 to find out how you can help us get it aired on your local Cablevision network. The program can also be viewed on the Society’s website, www.pinebarrens.org by selecting TV Show on the home page. The air times below are effective through September 30, 2016.


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