

## **County Government Key To Protecting Groundwater**

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Nothing is more critical to preserving property values, and northern Westchester's economic sustainability, than protecting our fragile water supplies from antiquated waste management systems, unwise development and pollution. The most cost effective way to ensure clean drinking water is to proactively protect our existing local sources.

According to the July draft of the *Comprehensive Croton Watershed Water Quality Protection Plan*, over 85,000 people rely on groundwater sources, or aquifers, for their drinking water – most in northern Westchester. The report estimates that between four and seven million gallons of septic system wastewater are discharged daily into the ground, resulting in the release of 800,000 pounds of nitrate into the ground each year. Nitrates from failing septic systems are choking our lakes and ponds and threatening private and municipal wells throughout northern Westchester.

The failure to act expeditiously will have dire consequences on our health, our environment and our economic competitiveness into the future. But by working with our strategic partners from the state, city and federal government, Westchester County is uniquely positioned to assist our towns to address these challenges. The Westchester County Board of Legislators is currently discussing legislation that would require septic inspection upon the transfer of title for residences. This is a positive first step, but given that 67% of the housing stock in the Croton Watershed was built before 1980, more needs to be done to manage the aging stock of septic systems in northern Westchester.

**Technical Expertise.** In 2003, Westchester County released a report evaluating groundwater conditions in northern Westchester. While a number of important recommendations were made in the study, it concluded that several towns in northern Westchester lacked detailed aquifer mapping and coordinated regional mapping was inadequate. Since aquifers don't recognize political boundaries, the county should implement detailed, regional integrated GIS maps of aquifers and recharge points, as well as incorporating thorough regional test well data to quantify the state of our aquifers. This will enable town and regional planners to create specific protection strategies, as well as assist towns to plan for future water needs so that they can work cooperatively to share resources to lower the cost burden for taxpayers. It will also allow policy makers to target appropriate open space acquisition funds to protect these critical areas.

Some hamlets, long considered environmental problem areas such as Katonah and Bedford Hills, have been grappling with the issue of sewers for decades without success. This is due, in part, to the massive scope and cost of the solution, as well as the difficulty in navigating the stringent regulatory processes of the DEP. Westchester County needs to not only provide increased technical assistance to communities in drafting such plans, the sizeable weight of the county government should come to the table on behalf of these communities while negotiating with the DEP.

Further, many homeowners and small businesses, through no malice, do not know that septic systems need proper maintenance. The county should undertake a vigorous, public awareness campaign to educate property owners as to the proper maintenance required for septic systems and to notify them when it is time to pump their system.

Financial Assistance. Many residents are reluctant to address their septic troubles out of fear that what they find will result in costly repairs. Therefore they view the County Health Department as a foe, rather than a potential ally in addressing septic trouble. This need not be the case. In Putnam County, and towns west of the Hudson River, New York City Watershed protection funds are used to fully pay for repairs or replacement of failing septic systems in close proximity to reservoirs and feeder streams, saving property owners thousands of dollars. Such a program should be implemented in areas of northern Westchester lying within the Croton Watershed. This will serve the needs of protecting New York City's water supply, but also protect the fragile aquifers in our community as well. For areas in northern Westchester outside the Croton Watershed, Westchester County could set up a low interest loan program to assist homeowners repair or replace failing septic systems, mitigating the potential financial burden.

Additionally, for areas already mentioned as needing limited sewers, as well as Peach Lake, the county has the ability to leverage NYC Watershed funds, as well as its own bonds, state and federal funds, to aid in the planning and construction process. The pace of these projects must be expedited.

Legislation. While several towns have discussed the need for septic pumping ordinances to protect our lakes and aquifers, they have yet to act citing the burdens of implementation and that the county has the legal authority over septic issues. After a prolonged public awareness campaign for voluntary compliance, the county should implement a septic pumping ordinance that would ensure that all homeowners pump and have their septic systems inspected on regular intervals, depending on the size of the individual system. By increasing the scope of the marketplace and leveraging the economies of scale, the cost to homeowners already properly maintaining their septic systems should be significantly reduced. Further, by providing technical and financial incentives to property owners to assist in the process, the county will help end the culture of "See no evil" when it comes to some property owners and their septic systems.

A clean, sustainable water supply is critical for the health and ongoing economic vitality of northern Westchester. By providing technical, financial and legislative support, Westchester County, working in conjunction with our towns, can help achieve this goal. Not only does this make good environmental policy, it is good fiscal policy as well.