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

DEBBY KRENEK *Publisher*

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EDITORIAL

We can turn the ugly tide

LI shouldn't accept life surrounded by polluted waters. We can take bold steps now to clean our bays, rivers, ocean and Sound.

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

On Long Island, we find ourselves drawn to the water that surrounds us. It calls us, and we seek it out.

The water is a place to swim and boat, to fish and surf, to paddle and sail. We walk and bike along its shore, stretch out before it to read a good book, and eat dinner while gazing at its moonlit beauty. For some of us, it's a place of work. For most of us, it's a place to play. It's a magnet for tourists and a sanctuary for our overworked and overstressed selves.

But over the years, we've treated it badly — mostly, by dumping nitrogen in it. Some of that comes from the fertilizers we use on our lawns and crops. A little comes from the air. But most of it comes from the cesspools and septic tanks that inadequately filter the wastewater we produce at home and at work.

We know all this. The science is rock solid.

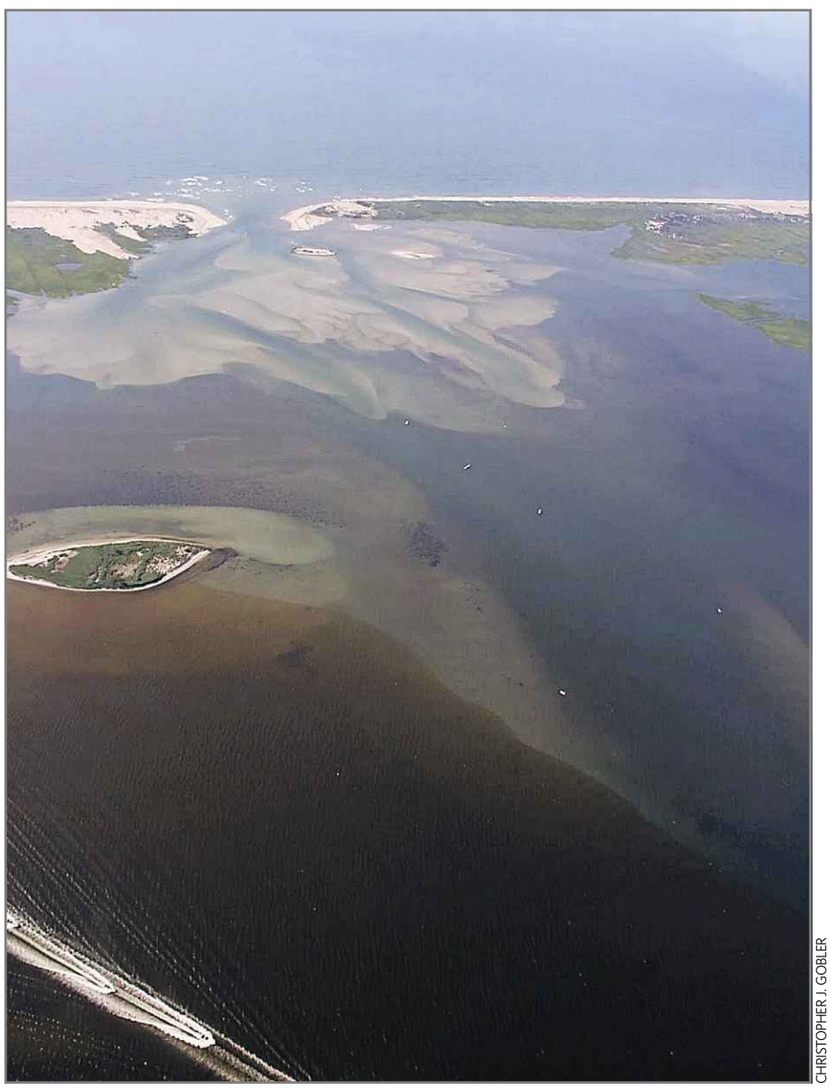
We also know what excess nitrogen has done to our water.

It has fueled the algal blooms that have decimated our shellfishing industry. It has killed much of the eel grass that makes up the marshlands that protect us from storms. It has depleted oxygen levels, creating dead zones in which fish cannot survive, as in three big fish kills in the Peconic River in 2015. It can turn some lakes, like Agawam Lake in Southampton and Lake Ronkonkoma, so toxic that swimming and other activities in them are banned.

It's taken a long time, and lots of studies and public education, but most Long Islanders understand well the region's nitrogen problem.

They also understand that something must be done to address it.

So we welcome a new report from Suffolk County that lays out the problem in exacting detail, analyzing the nitrogen at 191 individual sites called watersheds — surface water, not drinking water, though nitrogen levels are creeping up in some wells, too. Have a look online. The report checks the box for scientific rigor, and confirms what we've seen with our own eyes. It also charts a sensible plan forward.



CHRISTOPHER J. GOBLER

A 2015 view of the Great South Bay shows brown tide that occurs in local waters virtually every summer. Harmful algal blooms grow in part because of excess nitrogen.

And while it makes a compelling case for acting with urgency, it also offers optimism — that by taking the appropriate steps starting now, and moving steadily forward, we can reverse the trend of increasing nitrogen within 10 years.

A study of Nassau's North Shore by Stony Brook University shows similar nitrogen issues, and it should serve as a catalyst for that county to take similar steps.

Suffolk's strategy is a familiar one, put into overdrive. It calls for targeting homes not connected to sewers — some 360,000, nearly 75 percent of all homes in the county.

That makes sense; one study of the Great South Bay shows that nearly 70 percent of the nitrogen there comes from unsewered homes.

Some of these homes would be connected to sewers where density makes that feasible. Thanks to public votes this year in favor of sewer expansions, some $360 million in federal and state grants will be spent to connect roughly 7,000 homes in Babylon Town, Oakdale and Mastic. That's a great start toward the project's eventual goal of 30,000.

The county proposes to complement that by expanding its efforts to work with homeowners to replace cesspools and septic systems with innovative high-tech systems far more effective at removing nitrogen from wastewater. Wisely, it would begin with homes in high priority areas where it takes the least amount of time for groundwater nitrogen to reach our lakes, rivers, harbors and bays.

Suffolk created its program from scratch, testing and approving alternative systems, training staff and installers, getting state money for grants to help homeowners make the pricey conversions, which can cost up to $20,000. With 262 units installed or approved under the grant program, it's time to ramp up and the numbers in the plan are big — 172,000 replacements over the next 30 years at an average annual cost of $65 million per year. More will be swapped out in the years after that.

With near-universal buy-in on the need to attack the nitrogen problem, the big question now is where to get the money. Some state funding is available, but a recurring source of revenue is needed.

The preferred solution is to put a fee on water usage above what's typically used for essential needs. Suffolk County residents would have to vote on a referendum to set such a fee, estimated at about $75 a year for the average homeowner. Getting such a proposition on the 2020 ballot likely will require action by county and state lawmakers, but too many of them have ducked the issue.

It's time to take a stand. Lawmakers should either let Suffolk residents vote on the county's proposal to fund the war on nitrogen, or offer their own plan. Neither silence or obstruction are options.

This is a key moment. We either work to put a plan into action and reverse what's been happening, or continue to watch our waters degrade.

If you're wondering whether Suffolk can afford to tackle the problem, look at the water all around you and ask yourself the real question:

How can we afford not to?