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Save the Lake, Save the Pond Effort Launched in Montauk



Fort Pond in Montauk is "in peril," C.C.O.M. says, and is being targeted for conservation and cleanup efforts by the organization's new Save the Lake, Save the Pond campaign. *Christine Sampson photos*

By Christine Sampson

Fort Pond and Lake Montauk are more vulnerable than ever, according to the Concerned Citizens of Montauk, because of threats coming from above and below ground.

The problem of polluted runoff into waters after it rains is already well documented here, but concern is growing over aging, underground septic systems in developed areas around the lake and the pond that have begun to affect water quality. To address this, C.C.O.M. has launched a campaign dubbed Save the Lake, Save the Pond.

"As beautiful as it is, it's in peril. . . . The unfortunate reality is that our water quality is not what we want it to be," Jeremy Samuelson, the executive director of C.C.O.M., said during a news conference on Friday at Carol Morrison Park on Fort Pond.

C.C.O.M.'s water testing program, carried out by citizens who were trained by the Surfrider Foundation, has noted consistently high levels of the bacteria enterococcus tied to rain and seasonal warming of the waters in Fort Pond and Lake Montauk since the testing began four years ago.

Mara Dias, the national water quality manager for the Surfrider Foundation, said during the news conference that the bacteria as well as elevated levels of nitrogen likely come from septic systems and

lead directly to problems such as harmful algal blooms, the closure of swimming beaches, and the die-off of fish.

Right now, according to Victor DePietro, who owns Hamptons Septic Services and is another expert called in by C.C.O.M., many homes built in the 1970s or earlier have septic problems that their owners may not know about.

"There's a good probability that [your septic system] has roots growing in it, or it's full of solids," said Mr. DePietro, a 39-year resident of the South Fork who keeps a boat in Lake Montauk. "Most people don't service theirs until they're backing up. They call us up when it doesn't go down anymore."

Save the Lake, Save the Pond combines stewardship and advocacy in the hopes of making a difference, Mr. Samuelson said.

Trained "ambassadors" from among C.C.O.M.'s members, who were coordinated by Michelle Carlson, the project manager, over the past several months, will help guide volunteer homeowners and landowners, to be called "stewards," in learning how to better manage wastewater and runoff. Landscaping practices will be evaluated to make sure people aren't overfertilizing or using toxic chemicals, and septic systems will be inspected to determine whether they are adequate, declining, or altogether failing. Failing septic systems threaten more than just the health of lakes and ponds -- they eventually threaten the drinking water supply, too.

The advocacy part relates to East Hampton Town's planned referendum in November asking residents to approve an extension to the community preservation fund. It would allow up to 20 percent of the money collected as part of the C.P.F. to be used for water quality initiatives. C.C.O.M. supports the extension and is "pushing for the maximum," Mr. Samuelson said.

Such a program could benefit homeowners who need to replace failing septic systems by awarding tax credits to those who install better wastewater management systems at their properties, which would benefit the region as a whole.

C.C.O.M.'s goal is to attract 35 percent of the approximately 1,600 property owners around Lake Montauk and Fort Pond to become stewards over the next three years.

"We know it's a long-term problem, and it's going to be a long-term fix," Mr. Samuelson said. If the goal can be reached, he said, "we'd start to make some real progress here."

He said hundreds of volunteer hours have gone into the Save the Lake, Save the Pond campaign so far.

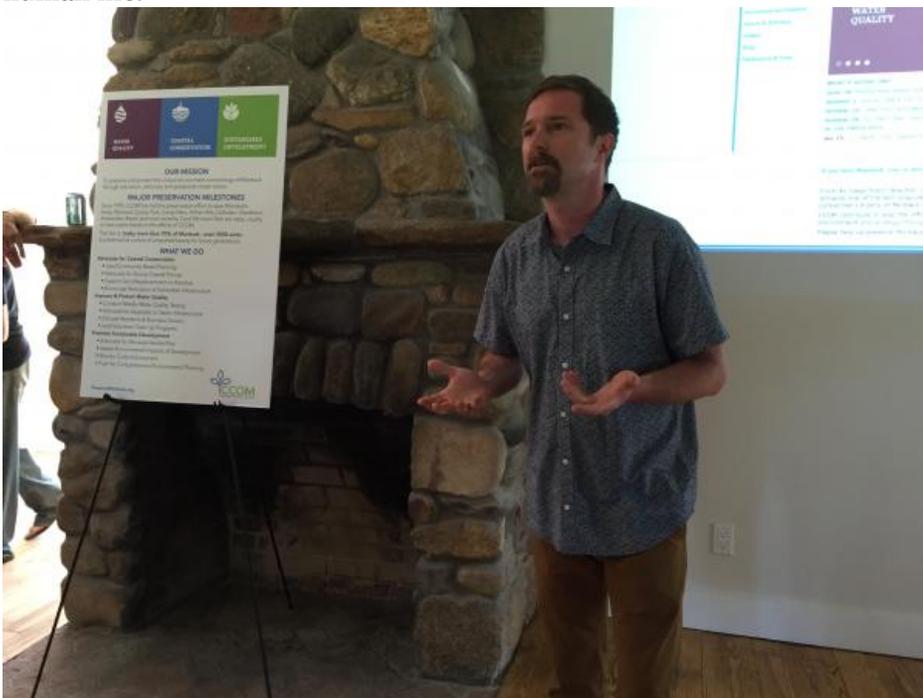
"This has been easily, hands down, the best volunteer program that C.C.O.M. has ever put together," he said. "We have never tried to mobilize such a large volunteer effort to get out there and engage the

community around a problem that means so much, from property values to quality of life to human health."

More water quality information and resources for property owners can be found at preservemontauk.org/save-the-lake.



Mara Dias, right, the national water quality testing supervisor for the Surfrider Foundation, who lent her expert opinion to the issue, said bacterial contamination in the lake and the pond are dangerous to both aquatic life and human life.



Jeremy Samuelson, the executive director of the Concerned Citizens of Montauk, launched the organization's new Save the Lake, Save the Pond campaign on Friday. It aims to preserve and improve water quality in Fort Pond and Lake Montauk.