

C.C.O.M. Stands Alone

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The most important work in the recent push to improve water quality on the South Fork has been done not by local government, but by a private organization, Concerned Citizens of Montauk, which has taken a science-first approach for more than four years. This is in sharp contrast to the elected officials in East Hampton and Southampton Towns, who have required expensive nitrogen-reducing septic systems for new houses without knowing for sure if they will result in measurable improvement for the environment.

One part of gauging success is knowing what the conditions are at the start. So far, none of our local government boards has embarked on meaningful data collection in the marine environment. Consider that. So far, the empirical information, which comes from a state program, actually shows nitrogen levels well below that considered harmful by the Peconic Estuary Program. Pio Lombardo, a consultant who is the architect of East Hampton Town's water strategy, dismisses the state results, saying the handful of saltwater test sites were in the wrong locations. He might be right, but he might be wrong. The fact is, no one knows. Yet.

C.C.O.M. stands alone, having been committed to testing many South Fork waters for fecal bacteria for years in partnership with the Surfrider Foundation's Blue Water Task Force. Several of the sample sites have consistently shown elevated bacteria levels, some in the dangerous range for human contact. Embarrassed officials have pretended that the C.C.O.M. program did not matter and have done nothing in response.

Now, C.C.O.M., working with the United States Geological Survey, has convinced East Hampton Town to come on board in baseline testing of pollutants in Lake Montauk. The data will help define water quality problems and put a system in place to monitor potential improvement. This approach must be expanded, ideally to the entire Peconic Estuary.