



Down the Drain Along the Shore

Big-time implications for local governments that run wastewater treatment plants

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Several developments having to do with water pollution crossed the transom in recent days that deserve wide attention. The Peconic Baykeeper organization announced that, with the Long Island Soundkeeper, it will file a lawsuit seeking better state compliance with provisions of the federal Clean Water Act. Closer to home, the Concerned Citizens of Montauk and local Surfrider chapter released results of water testing that showed high bacteria levels at several locations. And the East Hampton Town Board, in a typical exhibit of dysfunction, was unable to sign on to an extension of the Peconic Estuary Program, a regional conservation and management effort. And let's not forget the long-stalled Havens Beach remediation project in Sag Harbor, which was supposed to be completed by the beginning of the swimming season.

According to Kevin McAllister, who heads the Baykeeper organization, the State Department of Environmental Conservation has failed to enforce federal requirements for wastewater discharge permits. Citing excess nitrogen and other pollutants, Mr. McAllister said there are many sites on the South Fork where violations are likely — the inference being that a legal decision in Baykeeper's favor would have big-time implications for local

governments that run wastewater treatment plants, as well as for large, private polluters. Indeed, he said there are more than 1,300 sewage plants and septic systems in the region that do not adequately protect surface waters.

Homing in on the problem, C.C.O.M. and Surfrider took water samples at eight places during June and July, including the ocean beach at Ditch Plain and at the south end of Lake Montauk. While a number of locations tested within acceptable bounds for bacteria, water from an outfall pipe at the Montauk Shores Condominium at Ditch Plain and at South Lake Drive showed elevated levels of enterococcus, a fecal bacteria that can survive in saltwater. While this bacteria is generally not harmful to humans, it is considered a good indicator for the possible presence of a broad range of pathogens that could be dangerous.

As to the Peconic Estuary Program, an East Hampton Town Board meeting was temporarily derailed last Thursday over a vote to allow town staff to work in concert with those of other towns and villages on water-quality matters. When Councilwoman Theresa Quigley objected to the routine measure being brought to a vote after she had tried to kill it, Supervisor Bill Wilkinson voted no in what appeared a show of sympathy and Councilman Dominick Stanzone abstained. Hoping that last Thursday's instance of public pique was a temporary delay, we trust that a majority of the board will vote yes as soon as possible.