

Wrong Target For Sewage Treatment

Worrisome bacteria levels in several locations

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Now in its second year, a joint Concerned Citizens of Montauk-Surfrider Foundation water testing program continues to show worrisome bacteria levels in several locations, and the results call into question a proposal floated by an East Hampton Town wastewater consultant to build a sewage treatment plant to serve Montauk's downtown commercial center.

In a June 1 meeting of the Montauk Citizens Advisory Committee, Pio Lombardo of the Massachusetts firm Lombardo and Associates described his idea for a \$26 million facility to handle the effluent from about 170 developed parcels from South Eton Street to Essex Street. A letter designed to solicit support for the project has already gone to property owners.

Mr. Lombardo and the town have not adequately explained why the focus is on downtown Montauk, and the figures released this week by C.C.O.M. appear to show just how far off the mark the proposal really is. There were two locations that stood out as troublesome among the C.C.O.M. water samples taken during the week of June 22. Both were in Lake Montauk itself, which is part of an entirely different watershed. One sample, taken from a point identified as East Creek, recorded fecal enterococcus bacteria at just over 800 parts per 100 milliliters of water, which C.C.O.M. classified as a "high" level. Another, from West Creek, a perennial summertime hot spot, registered nearly 5,200 parts of the bacteria, a stunning result, considering that the Environmental Protection Agency sets the acceptable level at just over 100 parts.

The sole June sample found to be in excess of that level within the area encompassed in Mr. Lombardo's vision for a downtown sewer district was taken at Surfside Place Creek. It registered 216 parts, though in May a sample there was off the chart. Two Fort Pond samples taken by C.C.O.M. on June 22 were well within the E.P.A.'s freshwater standards.

There's a problem in Montauk for sure, but it doesn't look like it is the one Mr. Lombardo and town officials seem most eager to tackle. Enterococcus, like the nitrogen that figures in algae blooms and related fish kills, is thought to come mostly from failed, inadequate, or poorly placed cesspools, especially those that have heavy use and are near enclosed waterways. Kudos to Surfrider and C.C.O.M for keeping the focus on the real problems and on the locations most in need of immediate targeting.