

THE INDEPENDENT

NITROGEN FROM AGING SEPTIC SYSTEMS FEEDS TOXIC BLOOMS

Algae, Bacteria Contaminate Fort Pond

OCTOBER 16, 2018BY | T. E. MCMORROW

Laura Tooman, the president of Concerned Citizens of Montauk, presented the East Hampton Town Board with an alarming study focused on the health of Fort Pond, a freshwater lake in Montauk.

According to Tooman, CCOM has been regularly testing Fort Pond once a week since the beginning of the summer season, for both bacteria levels and blue-green algae bloom, and has found high concentrations of both. The water tests are done both on the south and north sides of the lake.

But while the chart she presented to board members, along with Town Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc, shows sporadic spikes in the level of bacteria, which frequently far exceed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's guidelines for safe water in which to recreate, the algae bloom has sky-rocketed in recent weeks, now far exceeding levels at which water is considered dangerous to recreate in.

The algae bloom, for example, was at about 28 micrograms per liter of water, over the 25 micrograms the Department of Environmental Conservation considers the maximum allowable amount. The spikes in the bacteria levels shown in various tests sometimes double or even triple the 104 colony forming bacteria units per 100 milliliters the Environmental Protection Agency considers the maximum.

"It is not good to recreate in the pond at all," she said. The Suffolk County Department of Health Services has posted warning signs around the pond, advising people to not swim near the blooms, and to keep their pets away from them. It appears from the chart that as the summer season progresses, more and more nitrogen from aging septic systems from around Fort Pond flow into the lake and feed the algae, causing an explosion of growth.

The short-term warning, simply put, is to stay out of the lake. Tooman warns that Montauk is in danger of losing events that involve the lake, such as the recent triathlon. The swimming portion of that event was moved from Fort Pond to Fort Pond Bay in the Long Island Sound.

The long-term answer for what ails the lake is finally getting a downtown waste water treatment system in Montauk, and encouraging all businesses and residents on and near Fort Pond to install modern septic systems, which would greatly diminish the amount of nitrogen flowing into the water.

One such installation of a new septic system is slated for the Surf Lodge on Edgemere Street. As part of the resort's settlement with East Hampton Town over a variety of zoning issues, the owners agreed to install a modern septic system. "They are on track," Tooman said October 15. She is hoping that businesses and residents in the area will follow Surf Lodge's lead.