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Opinion/Editorials

Suffolk residents should vote yes for clean water

A ballot referendum will help reduce beach closures, like the one at Gold Star Battalion Beach in Huntington, left, and keep our drinking water clean. Credit: Newsday/Steve Pfost, Rick Kopstein

By The Editorial Board

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In this year's election, voters will cast ballots for a range of federal, state and local races, including the president of the United States, U.S. senator, and lawmakers and judges at various levels of government. Those contests will grab the bulk of media and public attention.

But one of the most consequential choices facing voters in Suffolk County is not between two candidates. It has to do with the quality of our water. It's a

test we must not fail.

For years now, we have witnessed the continuing degradation of the region's water. Abundant scientific research shows that the primary culprit is excessive nitrogen. Much of that comes from the 380,000 outdated, nitrogen-polluting cesspools and septic systems in Suffolk. Over and over, we see the distressing consequences.These include beach closures and fish kills, harmful algae blooms that cause red and brown tides, and fouled lakes and bays and harbors devoid of life. Even the drinking water that comes from our precious aquifer is becoming contaminated.

Suffolk County Proposition Two asks Suffolk residents to approve a 0.125% increase in the county sales tax to fund the expansion of sewers and state-of-the-art septic systems that filter nitrogen out of wastewater. They are essential to the goal of clean water. Throughout the county, our wastewater infrastructure is inadequate. We need sewers in some places where there are none, and we must modernize outdated and failing cesspools and septic systems where sewers are not possible.

Proposition Two provides a recurring source of revenue to make it happen.

Let's be clear about what this referendum is: It is the culmination of an effort that has been a full 10 years in the making. It was approved by an overwhelmingly bipartisan vote in the county legislature, triumphing over some hardball politics that now is soon-to-be-cleaner water under the partisan bridge. The proposition has the backing of a wide range of interest groups,

from environmentalists to representatives of business and labor.

Let's also be clear about what this is not: It is not an onerous tax on Suffolk residents. At one-eighth of one percent, the sales tax hike will add 12.5 cents to a $100 purchase, or $1.25 to something that costs $1,000. The proposition, which also extends an existing drinking water protection program and converts a fund that stabilizes sewer rates, would raise some $6 billion through 2060 for sewers, new septic systems, and land preservation, which also works to protect water by banning development on sensitive land above our aquifer. In other words, Suffolk County Proposition Two shows that many people making small contributions adds up to something grand.

As you make plans for how and when to cast your ballot, stop for a moment to think about how important water is in our daily lives. Water is an essential part of what makes life in Suffolk County — and all of Long Island — so special. We love our beaches and parks, and our farms and vineyards, all of which depend partly or wholly on water. We swim in it, boat on it, fish in it, walk alongside it, dine by it, or simply gaze out at it. We tap our sole-source aquifer to drink and cook and bathe and clean. Our agriculture, fishing and tourist industries are dependent on it. Without water, Long Island simply is not Long Island. It is imperative that we keep it clean.

Long Islanders have a well-deserved reputation for supporting ballot measures that preserve and protect our environment. Time after time, voters have stepped up to approve local and state bond measures that helped acquire

land to establish parks, addressed the impacts of pollution and protected public health, built sewage treatment plants and managed hazardous solid waste, preserved and restored land and remediated brownfields. reduced flooding risks and mitigated the effects of climate change, and most recently, conserved open space and helped water districts filter emerging contaminants from drinking water.

Proposition Two is another of those critical referendums. Its frustrating legalese might make your eyes glaze over: "Resolution No. 526-2024, A Charter Law Pursuant To The Suffolk County Water Quality Restoration Act (Chapter 58 Of The New York State Laws Of 2023, As Amended) ..."

But its content is critically important to our collective future. If you live in Suffolk County, please take the time to find Suffolk County Proposition Two at the end of your ballot and vote yes.

Our water depends on it.