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## Sewer district would aid revitalization

### Plan would reduce pollution of Forge

**By Jennett Meriden Russell**

A pair of Suffolk County legislators this week proposed creating a sewer district in the Tri-Hamlet community designed to aid downtown revitalization plans and clean up the polluted Forge River.

At a press conference last Thursday at the Forge River Boat Club in Mastic, legislators Kate Browning of Shirley and Wayne R. Horsley of Lindenhurst said they would explore creating a public-private partnership to bring a sewage treatment plant and other infrastructure improvements to the area.

The creation of a sewer system in the area would allow for increased development within the business corridors while reducing the need for septic systems that have been blamed, in part, for the pollution of The Forge.

Local residents, environmentalists and civic leaders at the press conference hailed the plan.

"The river is littered with dead fish," Save The Forge River President Ron Lupski said, blaming septic tank overflows for much of the river's pollution. "The water, a mix of fresh and salt, is a murky gray color, everything is dying, and it smells like a cesspool."

The river, which runs between the hamlets of Mastic and Moriches, is about 3 miles long and empties into the Moriches Bay. Mr. Lupski's organization was formed several years ago in an effort to clean up the Forge.

Mr. Horsley, who is chairman of the Suffolk County Wastewater Task Force, said he and Ms. Browning hope to build a sewage treatment plant that would serve the Montauk Highway, Neighborhood Road and Mastic Road business districts and in so doing reduce the nitrogen load on the Forge River and its estuaries.

Mr. Horsley said the plan is to secure private funding to build the plant and eventually turn it over to Suffolk County. One possible incarnation of that plan would be for the county to help the Holiday Group construct a sewage treatment plant to serve a planned 450-unit senior housing development at the site of The Links golf course on William Floyd Parkway in Shirley and then at some point later take it over.

"I'm hopeful that if certain projects go through in this neck of the woods, that sewers can come along with them," Mr. Horsley said. "And I think we can see them shortly."

Mr. Horsley would not pin down an exact time frame for the building of the sewer system, but said he believes residents could see the first shovels going into the ground within five years.

"Ancient Rome had sewers, but we don't," Mr. Horsley quipped. "And it's time for that to change."

Ms. Browning said that it is only with the support of a heavily-invested community that the public-private initiative can become a reality. Under the senior housing proposal at The Links, 10 acres could be set aside for the creation of a private sewage treatment plant with at least 70,000 gallons of treatment capacity, or more.

To explore the public-private partnership, both legislators plan to cosponsor a resolution directing the Dept of Public Works to assess how the county could step in and take control of a private treatment plant and create a sewer district. Mr. Horsley and Ms. Browning have directed that study be conducted by the county, and within the current operating budget.

"The incentive to the private sector is economic development," Ms. Browning said. "These people want to come to our communities to develop, so what are they going to give us, the public? When you get sewers, you get economic development." Beth Wahl, president of the William Floyd Community Summit, said she was in favor of the proposed sewer system, noting that the area currently handles all its sewage by way of cesspools. Ms. Wahl said the cesspools, particularly in the business districts, are sorely lacking in their ability to handle any additional development. She said sewers are key to the revitalization of downtown areas.

"If we don't get a sewer district in this area, we're never going to see further development other than little strip malls and a

little store here and there," Ms. Wahl said. "And that's not what we want."

Mr. Horsley and Ms. Browning said by advancing a public-private partnership, and an associated 70,000 gallon sewage treatment capacity, the three business districts may end up benefiting from an economic boon of as much as \$215 million. In exploring this initiative, the two legislators stressed there has been enthusiastic federal support demonstrated for the plan.

U.S. Representative Tim Bishop, who is a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said he has been working to increase federal funding for Long Island's sewer infrastructure. He faults President Bush for being tight-fisted with federal funding and is hoping that the next president will open the door for more federal funding for infrastructure projects across the nation. Still, Mr. Bishop believes the reason that a sewer district has not been established in the Tri-Hamlet area is not entirely due to a lack of funding, and points out that sewers are typically not on the front burners of infrastructure expansion and improvement.

"When you think about infrastructure projects, you think about roads, you think about bridges," Mr. Bishop said. "You don't necessarily think about sewers. So, to be honest, most people take infrastructure for granted. Most people think, 'Of course there will be roads. Of course there will be bridges.' The level of importance of infrastructure is not as recognized as it should be, and then, more specifically, sewers are probably the last thing to come to mind."

Ms. Browning said establishing sewer districts in downtown areas is just the first step in curing the ailing Forge River. The more than 50,000 residents of the Tri-Hamlet area currently use cesspool systems, which seep into groundwater and have contributed to the demise of the waterway.

Ms. Browning said she would ultimately like to see the entire community hooked up to sewers, but admitted that was a "far reaching" desire that could take decades to achieve. Instead, she reveled in the first step of getting businesses hooked up to sewers.

"We are here today to stand up and say that our community needs this and wants this," she said. "The presence of virtually all our civic leaders, environmentalists, elected officials, and business owners shows the importance of this endeavor and the broad support it has here."



Suffolk County Legislators Wayne R. Horsley and Kate Browning announce plans to explore a public-private partnership to bring a sewage treatment plant to the Tri-Hamlet community during a press conference at the Forge River Boat Club in Mastic last Thursday. **JENNETT MERIDEN RUSSELL**