

## **LONG ISLAND POLITICS**

### **Suffolk County Executive Ed Romaine proposes \$5M water reuse project for Bergen Point Golf Course**

Bergen Point Golf Course in West Babylon may be irrigated with treated wastewater if county officials approve the plan. Credit: Barry Sloan

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Suffolk County officials plan to unveil a water reuse proposal Thursday that would allow the county-owned Bergen Point Golf Course to use treated wastewater from a nearby sewage plant for irrigation.

Environmental experts and county officials say the plan aims to protect surface and drinking water by limiting nitrogen discharge, and reduce the amount of water pumped from Long Island's sole-source aquifer.

Under the plan, which could require funds approved by the county Legislature, treated wastewater from the Bergen Point Wastewater Treatment Plant in West Babylon would be piped to the adjacent course to water the 142-acre golf lawn. If financed, it would be the first water reuse project since 2016 when the county-owned Indian Island Golf Course began using treated wastewater from the Riverhead Sewer District.

Suffolk County Executive Edward P. Romaine said he envisions the Bergen Point plan as the starting point for a "long-term vision" of implementing similar water reuse projects, particularly for golf courses.

"I believe it will have a long-term beneficial effect for this Island," Romaine said in an interview.

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The proposal comes on the heels of Suffolk voters in November approving a 0.125% sales tax increase to improve water quality, particularly for upgrading outdated cesspools. Those funds can now be used toward water reuse projects, officials said.

Last week, the Suffolk County Legislature approved spending \$150,000 in American Rescue Plan Act money for an engineering report and survey tasks related to the Bergen Point project.

Romaine said the estimated cost to connect the sewer district and golf course is about \$5 million. He said work could begin as soon as early 2025.

Legis. Ann Welker (D-Southampton) said in an interview that protecting the aquifer is of "paramount importance" in her district on the East End as well as across Long Island. She said she's "so hopeful" Bergen Point will lead to other water reuse projects.

In 2023, the Islip-based Seatuck Environmental Association and the Manhasset-based Greentree Foundation published a water reuse road map for Long Island that highlighted 17 potential projects as Tier 1 for "highest feasibility." Sixteen of those projects, including Bergen Point, involved golf course irrigation.

The report listed Bergen Point as 10th on a list of potential projects that could use the most reclaimed water, estimated at about 37 million gallons annually. It ranked as the least costly project in Suffolk County.

John Turner, a senior conservation policy advocate for Seatuck, said the sewage plant would be able to cover all the irrigation needs for the golf course. He said the infrastructure needs are "fairly modest" given the proximity between the two facilities.

Turner said his organization and other environmentalists advocated water reuse projects to be eligible for funding as part of the new sales tax increase.

Legis. Anthony Piccirillo (R-Holbrook) said during the Nov. 26 Legislature meeting that the referendum did not originally allocate funds for water reuse projects.

Legis. Steven Englebright (D-Setauket) said he would support a similar project in his district to supply treated wastewater to St. George's Golf and Country Club in East Setauket.

The 2023 report by Seatuck and Greentree described how excess nitrogen poses a public health risk and can trigger harmful algae blooms in surface water. It describes water reuse as a "complementary strategy" to the larger effort of replacing outdated cesspools with more modern systems.

Turner said water reuse projects have been common in other parts of the country where there's less access to freshwater like Arizona, California and Florida.

Michael Reichel, the Riverhead Sewer District superintendent, said the 2016 project at Indian Island has "definitely been a success" by reducing wastewater entering the Peconic Estuary. The project prevents an estimated one ton of nitrogen from entering the waterway annually and keeps about 63 million gallons of water in the aquifer, according to the 2023 report.

The sewage plant next to the Indian Island Golf Course can pump 450,000 gallons per day and averages about 275,000-300,000 per day, he said.

"It all depends on the golf course manager and how wet he wants or how dry he wants the course to be," he said.

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