

Long Islanders cross party lines to take a stand for clean water



Long Island nonprofits worked together to advocate for cleaner water. Photo courtesy of Group for the East End

“The people have spoken—red, blue, and independent. Water quality is a bipartisan issue,” said Robyn Silvestri, executive director of **Save the Great South Bay**, after an impressive 72 percent of Suffolk County voters supported a ballot measure in the November 2024 general election to fund the improvement of local water quality.

Renowned for its hundreds of miles of scenic shorelines, Long Island faces a crisis that started beneath the surface and has affected its diverse ecosystems. Nitrogen pollution from more than 380,000 outdated septic systems and cesspools in Suffolk County has created thriving conditions for dangerous water-based organisms that can harm humans, animals, and plants.

Thanks to the ballot measure’s success, efforts are now underway to fix the source of the problem. The Suffolk County Water Quality Restoration Act, also known as Proposition 2, funds the expansion of sewers and the installation of modern septic systems throughout the

county. These efforts will go a long way to reduce levels of nitrogen released into ground and surface water from the Island’s wastewater.

For decades, The New York Community Trust has partnered with a coalition of nonprofits and advocates, including grantees **Save the Great South Bay**, **Surfrider Foundation**, **Group for the East End**, and **Citizens Campaign Fund for the Environment**, to study the effects of nitrogen pollution and create public health solutions, laying the groundwork for Proposition 2 and its popular support.

The measure increases the sales tax by 12 cents for every taxable \$100 spent in Suffolk County, while generating an estimated \$6 billion over the next 35 years to invest in cleaner water, augmented by federal and state matching funds that could bring the project’s funding up to \$12 billion. The plan will install several hundred thousand new individual wastewater systems and thousands of sewer connections in existing or expanded sewer districts.

It also will invest in protecting water sources through land conservation.

“I like to tell this story to young people, because they can feel dejected, like nothing can ever happen,” said Bob DeLuca, president of Group for the East End. “I think the message here is that you can get things done if you build the campaign strategically, and if you’re prepared to put your shoulder into it for the long-term.”

For decades, Trust grantees have conducted research, mobilized communities, and advocated for policy change. A broad coalition, encompassing nonprofits, foundations, universities, developers, labor unions, and others, created a comprehensive campaign strategy that included rigorous water quality testing, public education, securing support from state and county officials, and robust grassroots organizing to rally voters behind the tax increase.

“It was crucial to consistently engage the public about water quality,” said **Melissa Greenberger**, a Trust program director for Long Island. “You have people experiencing gastrointestinal illnesses and skin irritation from contaminated water, you have fish dying off, you have dogs getting sick or dying, and you have a whole ripple effect from this problem.”

The campaign to win public support for the proposition highlighted how important water is to Long Island residents. DeLuca said this helped unite Islanders across party lines.

“The Long Island way of life is something people believe in and agree on, even though they may



Save the Great South Bay’s work monitoring water quality on Long Island helped lay the groundwork for this landmark victory for water quality advocates.

disagree about everything else,” said DeLuca. “They agree that we are on an island, that we are close to the coast, and all of us have an investment in protecting the water and being able to continue fishing, going to the beach, and doing all the things that we enjoy here.”

Reliable water quality monitoring was also critical to the campaign’s success. In 2015, as part of the **Long Island Sound Stewardship Fund**, The Trust supported **Save the Sound’s** efforts to launch the first-ever ecosystem health report card for the Sound’s water quality.

Recently, The Trust made a grant to Save the Great South Bay to work with other nonprofits to replicate the report card and water monitoring standards for

the south shore. The groups will collect and analyze water quality data to develop a bi-annual water quality report card, which will provide a critical accountability measure for the effectiveness of Proposition 2.

The Surfrider Foundation’s Blue Water Task Force, staffed by trained community volunteers, monitors bacteria from human and animal waste to provide crucial data on drinking water and water recreation safety.

“We’re all going for the same cause,” said Jenna Schwerzmann, the Surfrider Foundation’s Eastern Long Island chapter manager. “We know that sewage pollution is a huge problem for Long Island’s water bodies. We’re coming at it from a public health angle to try to inform people who

Nonprofits working to improve Long Island’s water quality include:

- Citizens Campaign for the Environment
- Community Development LI
- Concerned Citizens of Montauk
- Friends of the Bay
- Friends of Bellport Bay
- Grassroots Environmental Education
- Group for the East End
- Long Island Pine Barrens Society
- The Nature Conservancy
- Peconic Baykeeper
- Peconic Land Trust
- Save the Great South Bay
- Seatuck Environmental Association
- Surfrider Foundation

are recreating.”

After the act passed, the coalition shifted focus to its implementation. The tax increase took effect in March 2025, with grants for homeowners and larger-scale sewer projects expected in 2026. A 21-member board will oversee the grant process, and advocates are committed to ensuring it is accessible and responsive to public needs.

“Preserving water quality isn’t only about protecting a natural resource; it’s about safeguarding the health, prosperity, and stability of Long Islanders and the Island’s ecosystems for future generations,” said Greenberger. “Getting this act passed was a monumental victory.” ■