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SMITHTOWN

Dam rebuild can begin without review

Committee rules project can start at Blydenburgh Park

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Suffolk County's proposal to build a new dam at Blydenburgh County Park in Smithtown can proceed with no review of its environmental effects, a committee that advises the county legislature has decided.

On Wednesday, six of seven members of the Council on Environmental Quality who were present voted to make a "negative declaration" on the dam project, meaning a new dam and the flooding of 118 acres to make a new pond will have little or no effect on the environment, and that an environmental impact statement was not warranted.

Some of the members said they felt the county had answered any concerns in its proposal and analysis. Others suggested a pond offered equal environmental benefits.

The previous dam partially collapsed in a heavy rainstorm in August 2024, emptying the pond and leaving an expanse of mud and tree stumps. Suffolk County Executive Edward P. Romaine immediately vowed to rebuild a dam and bring the pond back.

Flourishing wetland

But in the 17 months since the dam was breached, the muddy and barren pond basin has been transformed into a wetland meadow, a flourishing habitat for plants and wildlife.

A coalition of 21 local, state and national conservation groups — including Save the Sound, Seatuck, several Audubon chapters, Trout Unlimited, the Open Space Council and the Setalcott Nation

— have cataloged more than a dozen ecological harms that would result from building a new barrier across the Nissequogue River and have urged the council to recommend a full environmental impact statement.

The groups said flooding the new meadow will destroy the emerging wetland habitat for birds, native brook trout and other native fish; create an environment that encourages the growth of invasive hydrilla plants — and the toxic bacteria that hydrilla harbors; and increase the risk of flooding, among other possible problems.

At Wednesday's council meeting, some members of the community spoke in favor of a dam, saying they valued the views and bass fishing at the former pond; others wanted to preserve the free-running river.

There was no dispute that a dam would be classified as a Type 1 project under the state's

Environmental Quality Review Act, which is a project that can be expected to have significant environmental impacts. The county's planning department, in its 336-page proposal, acknowledged as much.

The presumption for Type 1 projects, under the law, is that a full environmental impact statement, or EIS, is warranted before any such project is approved or built.

DEC advises full review

The state Department of Environmental Conservation advised the county that a full review was warranted.

"The proposed project appears to meet the criteria considered to be indicators of significant adverse impact on the environment," DEC environmental analyst Thomas Kohlmann wrote to the county planning department in early January.

He said the pond was likely to

increase the risk of erosion, flooding and drainage problems and would destroy "large quantities of vegetation or fauna" and block the movement of resident or migratory fish.

The council's chair, Tom Gulbransen, reminded the council members during their deliberations that if they believed there could be just one adverse impact that cannot be mitigated, "then by law we need to trigger an EIS."

Gulbransen was the sole dissenter in the vote to skip a full environmental review.

"I think they missed the mark," Enrico Nardone, the director of Seatuck, said. "The state was recommending to them in the strongest language for them to issue an environmental impact statement."

The proposal must now be approved by the county legislature, and it would need multiple permits from the DEC.

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