

State takes steps to address 1,4-dioxane pollution



E. Christopher **MURRAY**

Although Long Island is surrounded by water, one of its most fragile resources is its drinking water supplied by an underground aquifer. While our water supply is subject to numerous threats, at least our government leaders on the state and local levels are being proactive to address two of the most pressing concerns. Recent government action holds out the promise of mitigating the harm to our water supply by increased nitrogen pollution and the presence of 1,4 dioxane.

Nitrogen pollution is a serious threat to not only our drinking water, but also the health and well-being of our beaches and

estuaries. Nitrogen pollution has also hurt Long Island's once thriving shellfish industry and has increased the frequency of dangerous algae blooms which can enter our drinking water supply, causes vomiting, skin irritation and even liver damage to those who ingest the contaminated water.

Long Island, especially Suffolk County, has never had a sewer system infrastructure to meet its growing population, and the wide spread use of septic systems, many of which are old and are becoming outdated, is a major contributor to the release of nitrogen that ends up in our waterways. Over 70 percent of Suffolk County properties are not connected to a sewer system.

Suffolk County is instituting a four billion dollar plan which includes financial incentives to encourage the development of sewer systems in commercial and residential areas, and also to promote the upgrading of septic systems, especially those near the coastline. Under the Suffolk County program, a homeowner looking to upgrade their septic system or connect to a sewer system can obtain grants and low interest loans to defray the cost. Eventually, all properties in priority areas near

the coastline will be required to install new septic systems.

While the program has engendered some controversy, especially the cost, the expense will be offset by federal and state grants, and a permanent funding stream through the state. Environmentalists, homeowners and businesses understand the importance of protecting our vital water resources. There is simply no choice but to address nitrogen pollution into our drinking water and the surrounding coastal areas if we want to sustain Long Island's future.

Another threat to our drinking water supply is the extent of the contamination by 1,4 dioxane, an industrial chemical found in many consumer products such as laundry detergents and soaps. The United States Environmental Protection Agency has labeled 1,4 dioxane as a likely human carcinogen, and the extent of its presence in our drinking water has come to light over the last few years. Over 70 percent of the water districts on Long Island have levels of 1,4 dioxane above what is considered safe. Despite this danger, the presence of 1,4 dioxane in drinking water is not regulated at the federal level.

This past session, however, the

New York State Legislature has taken the lead and passed a first in the nation bill which would prohibit the presence of 1,4 dioxane in public drinking supply beyond an amount that is harmless. While the legislation encountered stiff opposition from manufacturers of consumer products and water districts, our Legislature showed courage in passing strong restrictions for the benefit of all New Yorkers, especially those living on Long Island. The governor has yet to sign the legislation, but the law is clearly needed, and hopefully it will be enacted soon.

In this day and age of doubt as to whether government can do anything right, it is encouraging to see that these environmental issues directly effecting Long Island are being addressed in a thoughtful and proactive way. There is hope that our government institutions can still address problems and actually work for the people.

E. Christopher Murray is a partner in the litigation department and chair of the Environmental and Land Use Practice Group of Ruskin Moscou Faltischek, P.C.

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