

Westchester Coalition for Clean Water

Mission

Westchester Coalition For Clean Water's mission is to restore and protect clean water in Westchester's waterways for all community members now and into the future. We envision a Westchester where the county's waterways are clean and healthy, trash- and sewage-free, and flood resilient within 10 years.

Vision

Westchester County includes shorelines of both the Hudson River and Long Island Sound, and is home to nearly 1,000,000 people whose access to, and enjoyment of, clean water is integral to the vibrancy, diversity, economy, and health of the region.

We envision a Westchester where in less than 10 years federal, state, county, city, town, and village governments effectively work in partnership with County leadership to comprehensively address improvements in water quality and the full suite of infrastructure and policy improvements required.

This will result in:

- Beaches, creeks, rivers, and streams free from contamination and trash and are open for public enjoyment.
- Waters safe for fishing and shellfishing.
- Rain events don't cause untreated sewage leaking into basements, onto streets, or into rivers, creeks, the Long Island Sound and the Hudson River.
- New beaches and river pools in the Hudson River.

The Problem

Unfortunately, sewage overflows and leaks damage the environment of Westchester County's rivers, streams, harbors, Long Island Sound, and Hudson River. Sewage overflow events are triggered by rain storms that are becoming more frequent in our area. The rain storms result in nitrogen- and sewage-polluted waterways, closed shellfish waters in Westchester County's portion of Long Island Sound, public exposure to sewage overflows and leaks, and closed beaches – threatening environmental quality, human health, the economy, and quality of life. Sadly, these negative environmental and health risks disproportionately affect low-income communities and people of color.

Westchester County owns and operates 7 wastewater treatment plants and approximately 194 miles of trunk lines that connect municipally owned sewer systems to these treatment plants. Six cities, nineteen villages and nine towns, with a population of over 800,000 people, are each responsible for the maintenance and improvement of the satellite sewer systems within their boundaries.

The municipal and county sewage collection pipes and pumps are in need of repair and investment, after having suffered decades of chronic inattention. Broken and disconnected sewer lines not only allow sewage to leak out into groundwater, but excess groundwater and stormwater enters these sewer lines (known as Inflow and Infiltration) causing chronic sanitary sewer overflows and the discharge of inadequately treated sewage and pollutants into the Hudson River and the Long Island Sound. Waterways across the county are suffering water quality problems linked to sewage and stormwater pollution (see Map).

Much of this degraded infrastructure is at further risk from rising sea levels, frequent and intense rainstorms, hurricanes, and flooding. Westchester County's municipalities are constrained by tax caps, funding restrictions, staffing levels and capabilities, and competing infrastructure priorities that have limited investment in the maintenance and improvement of their sewer systems. The cost of repairing after system failures is much higher than the cost of regularly scheduled system inspection and maintenance.

In addition, the unnecessary treatment of rainwater and groundwater at our wastewater treatment plants increases operating costs, energy usage, and the county's greenhouse gas output. Considering the many challenges facing Westchester County's fractured and complicated water sector, protecting healthy water conditions for people and the environment requires a new construct for collaboration and cooperation.

The Solutions:

1. The WCCW calls for Westchester County policy leaders at the Local, County, and State level to lead a regional approach to achieving, maintaining, and protecting clean water.

Westchester's water problems are solvable, thanks in part to historic new levels of federal and state funding – but there's no guarantee this funding will be available indefinitely.

To make the most of this moment we need County leadership to work with municipalities to develop strategies and plans to maximize and access these funding opportunities, while prioritizing areas that are the most vulnerable and suffering from the worst problems. Collaboration of this type is already done by the County Planning Department for stormwater – a similar approach should be implemented for wastewater.

- 2. Improved governance, including potential consolidation under County operation and management, of Westchester County's entire sewer system, from lateral lines to sewage treatment plants, if done right could improve and assure water quality and equitable investment in infrastructure that invests in our communities.**

Poor water quality from leaking wastewater infrastructure is a County-wide problem that can't be fixed in a piecemeal municipality by municipality fashion. County-wide problems require County-led regional solutions. The County has the resources to coordinate and manage a regional sewer system and facilitate access to funding, all of which would result in better water quality. This concept received early support from the County Executive, key County legislators, and several local municipal officials as a possible best approach to keeping the sewage collection system in a state of good repair and ensuring cleaner water into the future.

The County should immediately 1) complete and release the languishing study on the economic and environmental benefits of consolidation it commissioned from Arcadis, 2) begin necessary work in the four pilot communities who are waiting for a response from the County, and 3) craft any necessary legislative and legal outreach working with State representatives and agencies.

- 3. There needs to be an actionable strategy to rapidly assess and prioritize aging and leaking pipes, develop a project cost estimate for the entire needs within the County, and a funding strategy with all local resources and new state and federal funding to address all repair issues within 5 years.**

Westchester's significant water infrastructure needs would be difficult to address on its own, but state and federal investment coupled with comprehensive, coordinated county-wide solutions would dramatically accelerate water quality improvements and result in efficient capital investment and management for all. Westchester's residents would be better served, Westchester's waterways would be cleaner, and water infrastructure operations would be improved for all. A countywide effort can leverage this funding to address the county's water problems.

For too long Westchester communities have suffered from contaminated creeks, rivers, streams, beaches, harbors, and waters of Long Island Sound and the Hudson River. The long-standing excuse is that we can't afford to fix the problem. We believe we can not afford to *not* fix our chronic water pollution problem.

Conclusion

Westchester voted for the Clean Water and Jobs Environmental Bond by 70% margins. These are communities that want to “#FixOurPipes”. Municipal and County Leaders need to work together to develop strategies to 1) target sewage collection areas with the most problematic leaks (most vulnerable areas and largest pollution); 2) collectively and effectively access grant funding; and 3) get going. Westchester should invest in infrastructure to invest in its communities. The Westchester Coalition for Clean Water is at the ready to work with Municipal and County officials to achieve these goals.