

## **Saving the Estuary: Conference takes detailed look at water body | The Sag Harbor Express**



From early in the morning through the late afternoon, Polish Hall in Southampton swelled with crowds nearing 250 on Monday, September 20. Contrary to its name, the arts and culture center wasn't bouncing to the beat of a polka, but instead teeming with the sound of dozens of experts speaking about the Peconic Estuary.

Above: Local politicians like Southampton Town Supervisor Anna Throne-Holst and Sag Harbor Village Trustee Robby Stein speak on a panel about how municipalities can aid efforts to maintain and protect the Peconic Estuary.

In the wake of rampant and reoccurring red tide, among other issues in local waters, the Peconic Estuary Program held a "Call to Action" conference to engage local politicians, environmental leaders and ordinary citizens in a day-long conversation on the problems facing the East End water body.

"[The Program] really cares about understanding what is going on in the estuary. [The conference] was a nice blend of citizens and scientists and baymen and I think it was a good example of inter-community involvement," said Sag Harbor Village Trustee Robby Stein, who attended the event and sat in on a panel with local government officials. "Like any group they want more from the villages, towns, county and state, but they really have measurable goals and present it in a dialogue that is very informative."

The Peconic Estuary earned its designation from the Environmental Protection Agency in 1993, due in no small part to the efforts of New York State Assemblyman Fred Thiele who spoke at the conference. The Peconic Estuary Program is responsible for drafting and implementing a management plan for the waterway. A Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan was formally approved by the EPA in 2001.

During the morning sessions on Monday, the program focused on four critical issues: nitrogen management, eelgrass management, habitat restoration and storm water management. Experts explained that an excess of nitrogen — caused by septic systems and treatment plants, runoff and fertilizer use — stimulate the production of algae which in high levels are harmful to fish and marine life. They encouraged citizens to stop using nitrogen-based lawn fertilizers and asked them to maintain and upgrade their septic systems. For local governments, the program suggested implementing a five percent tax on such nitrogen rich gardening products.

Beginning in the 1930s, the Peconic Estuary has lost roughly 80 percent of its eelgrass, an aquatic plant which provides a habitat for marine life as well as improving water quality. With brown tide threatening the plant species, the

program asked residents to minimize the runoff from turf surfaces and to discontinue the use of harmful fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. The municipalities were urged to set up eelgrass protection areas which would limit access and harm to the plant.

The panelists also noted that wetlands once teeming with a variety of marine life are now ruined by storm water runoff the growth of invasive species. In an effort to restore natural habitats in the estuary to promote marine life populations, they again discouraged the uses of fertilizers. Government officials were asked to use Community Preservation Funds (CPF) to implement habitat restoration projects.

As it flows over land or into other water bodies, storm water runoff often collects harmful pollutants along the way which end up harming the estuary. The program asked citizens to reduce the number of turf surfaces on their properties and to clean up animal waste. Local governments were encouraged to increase buffer zones and create incentives for property owners to use bay friendly landscaping practices.

The gathered politicians, including Shelter Island Town Supervisor Jim Dougherty and Southampton Town Supervisor Anna Throne-Holst, acknowledged the importance of improving the estuary. They noted that in light of the current economic constraints facing their municipalities it would be difficult to unearth funding for new projects.

Throne-Holst suggested the five towns of the East End work as a consortium to leverage funding for the estuary.

“I don’t think you see a lack of will but the almighty dollar is the issue. I favor the idea of all coming together and making that dollar as efficient as possible,” Throne-Holst remarked.

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