

Dear Quogue Residents,

A few people have asked me to shed some light on the two propositions that are on the reverse side of the ballot this year for all Suffolk County voters. The first one is pretty straightforward and asks whether the terms of Suffolk County Legislators should be increased from the present two years to four years. The second is more complicated and involves whether the Suffolk County government should be permitted to deal with its severe fiscal stress by transferring funds from a sewer rate stabilization fund held for the benefit of sewer district ratepayers in western Suffolk County so that they can be used for operating purposes and also by allowing the County to avoid the repayment from its General Fund of amounts previously borrowed from a fund held for the County's Drinking Water Protection Program. County Executive Bellone is urging that voters approve Proposition 2 as set forth in an email communication many of you may have received earlier this week. Regional environmental advocacy groups oppose Proposition 2.

Below is a seemingly neutral description of these propositions that I came across in an article from earlier this month on the website of the League of Women Voters of Suffolk County. It was written by Peggy Olness and Nancy Marr, both of whom are affiliated with that organization. It does not advocate a position but rather lays out some considerations for voters. You may want to research the issues further.

“PROP 1: . . .

SHALL RESOLUTION NO. 442-2020, ADOPTING A CHARTER LAW TO CHANGE THE LEGISLATIVE TERM OF OFFICE FOR COUNTY LEGISLATORS FROM TWO (2) YEARS TO FOUR (4) YEARS BE APPROVED?

“Details:

“The twelve year term limit for legislators would remain in effect notwithstanding any change in the legislative term of office. If approved by voters, the four year term of office would begin Jan. 1, 2022 (affecting all 18 Legislators elected on the November 2021 ballot).

“Pros:

“All other Suffolk County elected officials serve four year terms
Allows more time for legislators to see projects come to fruition
Frequent periods of campaigning for office and fundraising take time away from legislative issues

“Cons:

“Frequent elections help to keep legislators accountable
Frequent elections require candidates to hear from citizens more often

“PROP 2: . . .

SHALL RESOLUTION NO. 547-2020, ADOPTING A CHARTER LAW TO TRANSFER EXCESS FUNDS IN THE SEWER ASSESSMENT STABILIZATION RESERVE FUND TO THE SUFFOLK COUNTY TAXPAYER TRUST FUND AND TO ELIMINATE THE REQUIREMENT THAT INTERFUND TRANSFERS BE MADE FROM THE GENERAL FUND TO THE SEWER ASSESSMENT STABILIZATION FUND BE APPROVED?

“Purpose of Resolution 547-2020.

“This resolution proposes that funds from the Sewer Assessment Stabilization Reserve Fund (ASRF) be made available to pay county operating expenses. In 1987, county voters passed a quarter cent sales tax to fund the Drinking Water Protection Program (DWPP). The funds have been used for land acquisition, maintenance of water quality and the sewer districts, including current efforts to fund septic systems that can remove nitrogen from waste water. The ASRF Fund 404, which receives 25% of the DWPP tax revenue, was created within the Suffolk County Drinking Water Protection Program to protect taxpayers in sewer districts where there is an increase in costs of more than 3%.

“The ASRF ended 2019 with a balance of 35 million dollars. The resolution proposes a Suffolk County Taxpayers Trust Fund be created to receive 15 million dollars of the unspent balance, as well as any other sum that may be transferred to the Trust Fund to balance the county’s operating budget.

“The resolution also proposes that a debt of \$144.7 million, borrowed from the DWPP since 2011, be cancelled so that the funds that are released can be placed in the [Suffolk County Taxpayers] Trust Fund for use by the county for its operating budget, if so passed by the legislature.

“Background.

“In September 2020, the New York State Comptroller listed Suffolk County as one of the eight NYS municipalities in significant fiscal stress, stating ‘since the pandemic hit, local governments have seen a massive drop in sales tax collections. This is hurting their bottom lines and many have few options to plug the hole.’ [In the past,] rather than borrow from other sources that impose interest charges, the county borrowed from the DWPP with the requirement that it pay the amount borrowed back once revenue sources rebounded.

“ In 2018, 2019, and 2020 the county paid back a total of \$26.5 million, leaving \$144.7 million outstanding. The County Executive points out that Suffolk has satisfied some of its obligations by already spending \$29.4 million for water quality and land acquisition projects, as agreed to in a 2014 settlement, in which he agreed to repayment by 2029.

“There is concern that the intent and result of the resolution becoming law, although it deals with a complex issue, is not clearly phrased to the voter. The resolution is contrary to two court decisions. In the [former County Executive Steve] Levy lawsuit in 2011 and the settlement by the County Executive [Steve Bellone] in 2014 the county has been ordered to repay the monies borrowed from a fund dedicated to drinking water protection.”

Election day is almost here. Be sure to vote!

Peter Sartorius
Mayor