



Peconic Baykeeper Sean O'Neill tests the water in Shinnecock Bay one recent morning. PHOTO BY DANA SHAW

New Guardian of the Bays Takes a Proactive Stance **Sean O'Neill, hired earlier this year, shares vision for Peconic Baykeeper**

By Amanda Bernocco
September 15, 2016

Reaching over the side of his 29-foot Dyer boat, Sean O'Neill fills a nearly gallon-size plastic container with water from Shinnecock Bay. The sample would be used to complete a fecal coliform bacteria test once he returned to shore; such bacteria comes from the waste of warm-blooded animals, including people, and it is one of the most common microbiological contaminants found in the East End's waterways.

Moments later, Mr. O'Neill leans back over the side again, this time to fill a test tube with bay water. But rather than store it below, he immediately drops a test strip in the tube's contents to determine the water's pH level, as well as to record the amount of iron, chlorine and nitrogen present. On that day, a recent Thursday morning, the test showed that the bay water in Hampton Bays contained normal levels of nitrogen, or less than 0.5 milligrams; anything above that level could prove deadly to shellfish and other marine life.

Monitoring the health of local bays and tributaries is a small part of Mr. O'Neill's job as the Peconic Baykeeper, a position that he accepted just prior to the start of summer. He is also responsible for educating the public about the importance of

protecting both the groundwater and surface waters, conducting research, as well as monitoring and participating in the public environmental review of projects that could have potential adverse impacts on the ecological health of the South Fork's waterways.

"There isn't one role for the Baykeeper," Dan Gulizio, executive director of the Peconic Baykeeper, said during a recent interview. "Education is important. Reviewing water quality is important. Meeting with community groups. It's a diversified role across a wide range of interests."

After being appointed to replace Brady Wilkins, who held the position for only six months before resigning in April 2015, Mr. O'Neill, who grew up in Blue Point and now lives in Center Moriches, dove right in to his new job. He immediately began reviewing several local projects that could add nitrogen to the groundwater and bays, including a proposed luxury golf course community in East Quogue called "The Hills at Southampton."

Additionally, he has been reviewing the details of an upcoming referendum that will appear on the November ballot and

determine if a portion of the proceeds in the Southampton Town Community Preservation Fund can be set aside to finance future water quality improvement efforts—such as the upgrading of residential septic systems near low-lying areas—across the municipality.

Emphasizing that he is not against all development, Mr. O'Neill said he does not support the East Quogue golf resort being pitched by the Arizona-based Discovery Land Company, which seeks to build 118 residences and an 18-hole golf course on an estimated 168 acres in the hamlet. His reason: the developer has not provided enough evidence that the resort would not further damage already polluted Weesuck Creek. Dr. Christopher Gobler, a professor at Stony Brook University's School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences and an East Quogue resident, has referred to Weesuck Creek in the past as an incubator of sorts for toxins that have contributed to the emergence of destructive brown and red tides that have decimated local shellfish populations.

"No one has perfect information," Mr. O'Neill said, referring to both the would-be developers and the environmentalists opposed to the project. "But even if they use the best possible treatment, I'm still skeptical."

Mr. O'Neill, who docks his Baykeeper boat at the Aldrich Marina on Weesuck Creek in East Quogue, said it is difficult for him to believe that such an intense development would not result in the introduction of additional nitrogen into the groundwater and, later, the creek and Shinnecock Bay.

"Theoretically, is that possible?" the Baykeeper asked. "Sure. But show me an example—there aren't many."

Mr. Gulizio added that Mr. O'Neill and the Peconic Baykeeper's Board of Directors have been keeping track of the application, focusing mostly on how the developer is going to handle nitrogen unloading, though they have yet to take an official stance on the project.

Earlier this summer the Southampton Town Board deemed the third version of the developer's draft environmental impact statement, or DEIS, incomplete. The developer is looking for town's approval for a planned development district, or PDD—a zoning mechanism that allows increased density in exchange for perceived community benefits—to build both the homes and golf course along Spinney Road in East Quogue. Mark Hissey, vice president of Discovery Land Company, said he plans to submit a fourth version of the massive document shortly.

Mr. O'Neill said he is looking forward to reviewing the most recent version of the DEIS, once it is filed with the town. But, based on his earlier examination, he added that his opinion of the project has not changed much: "It's not good for Weesuck Creek."

By actively reviewing such applications, Mr. Gulizio said the Baykeeper can have a bigger impact on water quality in the area. About a decade ago, the Baykeeper's role was serving as more of an activist when it came to alerting people about the importance of protecting the marine environment, whereas today things have shifted to the point when the not-for-profit makes a point of paying close attention to individual applications and specific government policies that could potentially damage the East End's already threatened waterways.

Whenever a new project is proposed, as is the case with The Hills, Mr. O'Neill admits that he tends to err on the side of being cautious.

Regarding the upcoming referendum in which voters in all five East End towns will decide if a portion of their respective CPF money should be invested to improve water quality, Mr. O'Neill said he is remaining "cautiously optimistic" about the proposal. If approved, the change will allow the Southampton Town Board—in addition to continuing to preserve land and contribute money to those school and fire districts where significant amounts of land have been preserved and taken off the tax rolls—to also set aside money so it can offer financial incentives to homeowners who live near the water so they can update their antiquated cesspool and septic systems, both of which are to blame for the bulk of nitrogen now found in the water, according to scientists.

"It's a good plan, but it needs to be better at establishing a nitrogen baseline," Mr. O'Neill said, explaining that he wants to make sure the new septic systems are filtering out enough nitrogen before they are approved. "It needs to be more than just giving a rebate to homeowners." The referendum ties into Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone's "Reclaim Our Water" initiative, which focuses on upgrading antiquated septic systems across the county and testing newer systems that could eventually replace cesspools altogether.

While he supports the push for better septic systems, Mr. O'Neill said he does not think the county has dedicated enough research, or funding, in determining how much nitrogen can be in drinking water while it is still safe enough to drink. The current county standard of 10 milligrams per liter or less does not sit well with many environmentalists who think the county needs to raise its standards. To that extent, Mr. O'Neill thinks that the county should take the time to establish a nitrogen baseline for local waterways so officials can keep better records of current levels, and so they can have a concrete figure on which to properly assess the new septic systems once they are installed.

As part of its initiative, the county is now testing six advanced septic systems that it has not yet approved for widespread use, including those installed at houses in East Quogue, Sag Harbor and Montauk. Before the systems receive final approval, the county will make sure that they are filtering enough nitrogen out of wastewater so that there is less than 10 milliliters of nitrogen per liter in the water. At least one septic system is expected to be approved by the end of summer.

Mr. O'Neill said he is pleased that the county, after years and years of stagnation, is finally taking an active role in addressing outdated septic systems.

"Overall, it's a good thing," Mr. O'Neill said of the recent attention to the subject. "County Executive Steve Bellone said nitrogen is our No. 1 enemy. It's good that it's at the top of his agenda, and it's not just environmental nuts like me talking about it."