

Baykeeper Re-Focuses Efforts to Broader Effect

By Michael Wright
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As the Peconic Baykeeper organization enters its 20th year of advocacy for the health of the waters of the East End, both the organization and the individual bearing its namesake title have begun to retool their mission, moving in a new, broader, public policy-oriented direction.

For 17 years of its history, under founding Baykeeper Kevin McAllister, the organization used its strengths in public outreach and lobbying—and sometimes suing—government entities to tailor practices and development work, aiming to lessen negative environmental impacts on water quality and marine species in the Peconic Estuary. The Baykeeper lobbied against development, pushed for better protections and the restoration of wetlands buffers along the edges of the bays, and repeatedly sued Suffolk County over policies he said were damaging to the marine ecosystem.

But over the past year, the group, and its new leadership, have begun an approach seeking more far-reaching and long-term effects on water quality.

“We’ve elected to refocus our efforts . . . on treating the underlying cause of water quality decline,” said Baykeeper Dan Gulizio, who took over as the group’s front man last spring. “We are interested in making sure the public is more aware of how land use impacts water quality. We want our public officials to understand how their land use decisions affect the overall system.”

“One of the things we’ve tried to do is focus more on policy and process, as opposed to individual applications. There are so many applications out there that it’s difficult to weigh in on all of them. Focusing on policy and process . . . can have a ripple effect across many projects, which is what we need to see in Suffolk County.”

The Baykeeper redirection comes in light of revelations in recent years about how development on Long Island has affected local waters, creating a dire condition in some bays and water bodies. For the last several months, Mr. Gulizio has been leading a public outreach campaign aimed at community groups, civic organizations and local municipal boards, and the mantra is that Suffolk County has some of the least restrictive development controls in the nation—and water quality issues to match.

If the East End towns hold out any hope of resurrecting local bays and ponds from the annual ravages of algae blooms, Mr. Gulizio says, that approach to development limits must be reversed, quickly and substantially. In just the last five years, scientists have made concrete connections between residential development, the septic influxes that come with them, climbing nitrogen levels in local bays, and the emergence of those harmful algae blooms.

“All the towns need to do a better job of understanding what the [nitrogen] loads are within their boundaries, because that can help shape better land use practices,” the Baykeeper said. “If we know in an individual watershed that they’re already above what’s sustainable, we can know that we have to promote a net reduction.”

To achieve such reductions, and make up for decades of severe excess, the county and individual townships need to begin to demand that any development projects calculate an overall reduction in nitrogen output, Mr. Gulizio says. The Baykeeper’s preferred approach would dictate that developers seeking permission for new projects that will add nitrogen to the system should be required to make accommodations for commensurate reductions in nitrogen inputs elsewhere—a kind of cap-and-trade on human waste.

That would be a departure from what has largely been the norm, particularly with projects approved by Suffolk County. Improvements in septic treatment systems have meant that developers have come to municipal approval boards waving the flag of new, more effective waste treatment systems.

But they have, almost without exception, also used such advanced and expensive features to press for permission to vastly expand the intensity of development. And, with the cape of economic benefit always draped across proposed development on Long Island, they’ve won approvals for new construction, across county and town lines.

“Just a couple years ago, all we were talking about was state legislation on stricter nitrogen standards for sewage treatment plants . . . from 10 parts per million to 4 parts per million,” Mr. Gulizio said. “That’s helpful, but what’s more important isn’t the percentage of nitrogen coming out of the pipe, but what the total

volume coming out is. That is the real conversation that has to be had.”

Mr. Gulizio has a long history in wrangling with development and the political forces through which regulation is often filtered. He is a former deputy director of planning for Suffolk County, a former commissioner of planning for Brookhaven Town, and former commissioner of planning and development in Islip Town. He is also an attorney, with a law degree from St. John’s University, and holds a master’s degree in urban planning from Columbia University.

He served on the board of the Peconic Baykeeper before taking over the Baykeeper title—technically, the executive director of Peconic Baykeeper organization—in the spring, following the departure of longtime Baykeeper Kevin McAllister last year, and then his successor, Brady Wilkins, who left after just six months on the job.

Now Mr. Gulizio is taking his years of experience in and frustration with the development machine on Long Island and putting it into boots on the ground. Among the approaches the Baykeeper is proposing to help Suffolk County and its townships get out of their own way is a public-private partnership, patterned after the Central Park Conservancy, that melds philanthropy, grassroots fundraising and political action.

Such an arrangement on Long Island could help both spread understanding and break the gridlock of a county machine perpetually in the grip of fiscal constraint that politically retards any sort of progressive policy moves.

“Good information is the basis for all good decision-making,” he says. “One of the things that is lacking is a comprehensive, non-partisan, professional information source to augment what is out there now. Water quality is in everybody’s dialogue now. There’s no question that people are talking more today about how land use impacts water quality. But our land use practices are only getting more unsustainable.”