

LONG ISLAND / POLITICS

Suffolk eyes preserving land in



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..., recently closed as Suffolk County's largest



By **Rachelle Blidner**

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Suffolk County officials are putting a new focus on acquiring open space in "environmental justice areas," communities that have been disproportionately impacted by pollution and other environmental problems.

As county officials consider which parcels to purchase and preserve as open space, they will give additional weight to properties in environmental justice areas, which have sizable minority or low-income populations, according to a measure recently passed by the county legislature.

Such areas include parts of Brentwood, North Bay Shore, Central Islip, Copiague, Deer Park, North Bellport, Mastic Beach, Upton, Gordon Heights, Riverhead, Flanders, Northwest Woods and Tuckahoe, according to the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The new focus on environmental justice comes after a long history of governments preserving land in mostly wealthy and white communities, which have more available open space, said Stony Brook professor Christopher Sellers.

"It's going to be a long haul to really rectify that," said Sellers.

The county's large-scale land preservation efforts began in 1987, when voters approved a 0.25% sales tax for drinking water protection. The county has spent more than \$1 billion to preserve more than 36,700 acres since the program began, officials said.

Land sold voluntarily by property owners to the county is maintained as open space or turned into parks or public preserves.

Officials recently updated the county's wish list of nearly 1,500 environmentally sensitive properties they would like to acquire and retooled the rating system used to assess parcels. The county typically ranks properties to purchase based on a rating sheet, which has a maximum score of 100 points.

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The new rating sheet gives points for parcels in environmental justice areas and "park deserts," as well as those that could improve coastal resiliency, prevent more nitrogen entering waterways, or link to hike and bike trails, officials said, as well as "blueway" trails, which provide water access.

The county has updated the categories it considers over the years to "continue the rich tradition of land protection and protecting the environment," said Kevin McDonald, director of public lands for the Nature Conservancy of Long Island.

The rating sheet already gave points for wetlands, woodlands, Pine Barrens and coastal areas, as well as for acquisitions in higher density areas, which often overlap with environmental justice areas, said Sarah Lansdale, county director of planning and environment.

But what properties the county acquires depends largely on who is willing to sell their land, said Legis. Al Krupski, who sponsored recent legislation updating the wish list

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The previous wish list, created in 2012, had more than 1,400 documents. Another 141 properties were preserved through the process.



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4.6 million as of the end of 2020, according to county officials.

The inclusion of environmental justice areas on the rating was "a step in the right direction," said Legis. Kara Hahn (D-Setauket), who proposed the measure.

Environmental justice areas are communities that have suffered environmental benefits because they've been harmed.

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Keim Odekon, an environmental justice activist from Brookhaven hamlet, said that while he supports increasing open space, preserving a few parcels won't do much to combat the effects of years of harmful planning decisions in such areas.

Odekon, 41, a primary care physician, said North Bellport, which is next to the Brookhaven landfill and has large Black and Hispanic populations, has the lowest life expectancy on Long Island. Area residents are now fighting a planned waste transfer station and industrial development in nearby Yaphank on largely undeveloped land the county sold in 2013.

"To me it's a nice headline, (but) let's do real work," said Odekon, a member of the Brookhaven Landfill Action and Remediation Group.



commercial zoning in minority and lower-income communities, which had "the least voice and least political clout."

Developers also had a financial incentive to build denser housing, and many of the ones that created communities with parks, such as Levittown, barred people of color from living there, Sellers said.

Minority and lower-income areas were then at a disadvantage for land preservation, Sellers and McDonald said. Government officials tend to favor purchasing large properties that may have more environmental value, but few, if any, exist in those areas.

"That's why it's long overdue to have a conscious effort to say, 'Let's equalize this,'" Sellers said.



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Rachelle Blidner covers Suffolk County government, politics and breaking news.



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