

Airing Out Oyster Program

By Christopher Walsh | December 13, 2018 - 2:00pm

An informational session about the Suffolk County Aquaculture lease program, under which 10-acre parcels are leased for private, commercial shellfish cultivation, will be held at Town Hall next month, the East Hampton Town Trustees announced at their meeting on Monday.

John Aldred of the trustees told his colleagues that county officials have agreed to his request that they give a presentation and accept comment on the program, which the county has implemented in Peconic Bay and Gardiner's Bay. The presentation is scheduled for Jan. 9 at 6 p.m.



David E. Rattray

The program was established after New York State ceded title to approximately 100,000 acres of bottomlands to Suffolk County in 2004, and authorized the county to implement an aquaculture lease program for the region. The program was adopted in 2009, and a 10-year review will assess legal and administrative requirements governing its operation and recommend changes.

A 10-year advisory group was established to obtain public official and stakeholder interest group involvement. Mr. Aldred, representing the trustees, is a member of that group, as is Barley Dunne, the director of the town's shellfish hatchery, who represents the town.

In East Hampton, the program has been controversial. Members of the Devon Yacht Club in Amagansett and residents who live along Gardiner's Bay were unhappy about the changing seascape brought about by the appearance of oyster farms offshore. Early this year, an attorney for the yacht club filed a lawsuit in State Supreme Court seeking to bar leaseholders situated near the club from undertaking or continuing any action related to oyster farming at lease sites granted by the Aquaculture Lease Board in July 2017, or engaging in any other activity that would interfere with sailing. The Aquaculture Lease Board, the county's planning department and its director, the Amagansett Oyster Co., individual leaseholders, the town, and the State Department of Environmental Conservation were all named in the suit.

One of the program's lessees had informed the club that he was going to build out a lease site 1,000 feet from the end of the club's pier. Lease sites approved last year were concentrated and mostly contiguous, rendering a few hundred acres off limits to Devon's more than 300 member families, an attorney for the club said.

Hence, "we'll reach out to the boating community, the recreational water-use community, the fishing community, anybody that we can think of that has an interest in the bay," Mr. Aldred told his colleagues, to alert them to the Jan. 9 informational meeting. "The county will give a short presentation, then open the floor for feedback, whoever wants to weigh in on this in East Hampton, so there's no question that this hasn't been brought to the attention of local interests."

"I wanted to make sure that feedback from East Hampton got in there early in the process," Mr. Aldred said, "so that any concerns could be put on the table and addressed throughout the course of the review."

“We should make sure Devon Yacht Club gets special notification,” Bill Taylor said, to laughter.

In other news from the meeting, the trustees voted to support a ban on the intentional release of balloons in the town, as they had indicated they would do at their previous meeting, on Nov. 26.

The move followed a presentation at that meeting by Colleen Henn, the clean water coordinator of the Surfrider Foundation’s Eastern Long Island Chapter, in which she read startling statistics as to the volume and type of debris collected during organized cleanups of the shoreline this year. She had asked that the trustees urge the town board to follow the lead of several coastal municipalities in New Jersey and in New Shoreham, on Block Island, by banning the intentional release of balloons.

Under Suffolk County law, a person can release 25 balloons in a 24-hour period. Release of helium-filled balloons remains popular at celebrations such as weddings, birthday parties, and graduations, but marine animals can mistake them for jellyfish and ingest them, blocking the digestive tract and causing a slow and painful starvation. Wildlife can also become entangled in balloons’ ribbons or strings, another cause of mortality.

On Monday, Susan McGraw Keber read the resolution stating that the trustees, in conjunction with the Surfrider Foundation, support a ban on the intentional release of balloons, and her colleagues voted unanimously in favor. “We can never get rid of them,” she said of Mylar and latex balloons. “They are not recyclable. This is a start in the right direction.”

After the meeting, Ms. McGraw Keber said that she would meet with the town’s recycling and litter committee. Councilwoman Sylvia Overby, the town board’s liaison to that committee, “is already on board,” Ms. McGraw Keber said. Written and oral testimony urging a ban would be directed to the town board, which would decide whether or not to schedule a vote to enact such a ban, she said. “If they do, it’s one step ahead.”

Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr. and County Legislator Bridget Fleming are also supportive of a ban, Ms. McGraw Keber said. “They really want to see this move outside of just East Hampton,” she said. “Fred said he wants to take it to the state.”



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