



Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan (LINAP) Newsletter

Safeguarding Hempstead Harbor: A Story of Collaboration and Environmental Stewardship

Protection Committees serve as inter-municipal coalitions that provide a coordinated and highly effective approach to improving water quality and solving watershed problems across Long Island. The Island is fortunate to have several Protection Committees that work to protect, restore, and enhance the watersheds that they serve.

Protection Committees develop and implement planning studies, capital improvement projects, educational outreach, water quality monitoring, information and technology sharing, coordination of enforcement, and collaboration. They also track and comment on proposed laws and regulations and aid member municipalities in carrying out the federal and state-mandated municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) requirements. Long Island's Protection Committees collectively represent over 50 Long Island municipalities.

In this month's LINAP newsletter Eric Swenson, the Executive Director of [Hempstead Harbor's Protection Committee's](#) (HHPC)—the first of its kind on Long Island—shares the important work undertaken by HHPC, the challenges encountered along the way, and the notable achievements attained.

Reflecting on Hempstead Harbor's past, Eric recounted a time in the 1970s when the harbor faced severe environmental degradation. A sobering article by Newsday, titled "Who's Killing Hempstead Harbor," shone a spotlight on the myriad of threats facing this once-thriving waterway. Rotting wooden barges marred the landscape and oxygen-deprived waters led to periodic fish kills. Beach closures due to high bacteria levels, sewage discharge from the aging Roslyn treatment plant, and the presence of superfund sites along its shores painted a bleak picture.

Who's Killing Hempstead Harbor?

By Harry Pearson
Weekly Environmental Writer

This is a detective story. The purpose of the investigation is to find out who is killing Hempstead Harbor.

That it is being killed ought to be self-evident. Rats infest its shoreline. Garbage floats, unchallenged, in its waters. Dead fish turn up on its beaches weekly in summer. Children swim in waters contaminated by industrial wastes and partially treated sewage. And, unless there is a stiff wind, the air is obscured with a palish-blue smog. The head of Adelphi University's ma-

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In response to these alarming conditions, concerned citizens formed the [Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor](#), advocating for the harbor's preservation. However, despite these grassroots efforts, the governmental bodies surrounding the harbor addressed issues independently, and often faced a shortage of resources. Recognizing the urgent need for coordinated and collective action, then Assemblyman Tom DiNapoli, now State Comptroller, and former Sea Cliff Mayor Ted Blackburn conceptualized the idea of a Protection Committee and secured funding from the New York State Department of State in 1995 to create the HHPC. The nine municipalities, Nassau County, City of Glen Cove, Town of North Hempstead, Town of Oyster Bay, Village of Flower Hill, Village of Roslyn, Village of Roslyn Harbor, Village of Sands Point, and the Village of Sea Cliff each signed an inter-municipal agreement, marking the birth of Long Island's first watershed-based inter-municipal coalition.

Since its inception, HHPC has made significant strides in revitalizing Hempstead Harbor, and serves as a model for collaborative environmental stewardship. Its success has inspired similar initiatives. “Three years after we were formed, the Manhasset Bay Protection Committee was formed. And then came the Oyster Bay/Cold Spring Harbor Protection Committee. There are now Protection Committees in Northport Harbor, the Peconic Estuary, and Accabonac Harbor. And there are efforts underway right now to form a Protection Committee in the Port Jefferson area, further advancing the cause of harbor preservation and sustainability,” said Eric.

Central to the HHPC's strategy was the development of a Water Quality Improvement Plan (WQIP) —a comprehensive study that has since become the blueprint guiding HHPC's efforts to restore and protect the harbor. The Plan divided the harbor into sub-watersheds, identifying sources of pollution and critical areas in need of targeted intervention. Over the years following the WQIP, the committee's efforts paid off, as successful initiatives led to tangible improvements in water quality and ecosystem health. Grants totaling approximately \$3 million were secured for vital infrastructure projects, including the restoration of Scudders Pond. “Instead of trying to tackle everything at once, we started addressing one subwatershed at a time.

Scudders Pond was identified as the worst subwatershed (in the WQIP) and so we put a lot of effort into its restoration. There's a lot of very steep hills and the stormwater would runoff into Scudders Pond and over time it filled with sediment, which then reduced the pond's ability to serve as natural biofiltration before it discharged into Hempstead Harbor,” explained Eric. With the grant funding in place, over 5,000 cubic yards of contaminated material was dredged from the pond, invasive plant species were removed, and the shoreline was rebuilt using imported sand and replenished with locally grown native plant species. Storm drainage was installed, and two dams were reconstructed to maintain the original size and depth of the pond. Water quality monitoring was conducted prior to, during, and following construction and the results show significant improvement in the water quality entering Hempstead Harbor. Today, the pond is a regulated wetland that continues to act as a filter for run-off into Hempstead Harbor.



Scudders Pond, Village of Sea Cliff, NY. Photo Credit: Galvin Brothers

Since its beginning, the HHPC has been at the forefront of stormwater management, spurred by the recognition in the WQIP that stormwater is the main source of pollution in Hempstead Harbor. One critical initiative is providing guidance and assistance to member municipalities in carrying out the federal and state-mandated municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) requirements. This is critical because it saves municipal members time and money toward compliance as many of the activities (i.e., septic system education, outreach/stewardship activities) undertaken by HHPC can be counted toward each of the municipalities' stormwater compliance requirements. “There's a complex set of requirements and deadlines for municipalities to comply with, posing challenges, especially for smaller municipalities,” Eric states. “Municipalities are facing over 80 deadlines within the next five years, including various types of training for employees and the creation of 10 different plans. We, the Protection Committees, can alleviate the workload by sharing responsibilities.”

When the HHPC was formed in 1995, the [Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor](#), had already established a comprehensive water-quality monitoring program in the harbor. The HHPC decided to adopt and support this existing program. The monitoring program has expanded over the years and was largely funded through grants obtained by HHPC. The core program (May to October) involves weekly monitoring at up to 21 locations. A comprehensive [Annual Hempstead Harbor Water-](#)

[Quality Report](#) is prepared each year which analyzes the data and describes any trends. The 2023 Report is anticipated to be released later in the year.

The critical importance of regular monitoring is identifying and addressing environmental issues promptly. This became evident during an incident where high bacteria levels were detected in Glen Cove Creek, leading to the discovery and repair of a broken sewer main. “Once we identified the sewer main break and it was repaired, the levels went down. But if we weren’t out there monitoring, that could have gone on for years. It could have closed the shellfish beds that we spent so much effort to try to open in the mouth of the harbor,” Eric emphasizes. When concerns were raised about future funding for the monitoring program, the HHPC worked to secure a consistent recurring funding source. Starting in 2026, the program is expected to be funded through Long Island Sound Study’s management funds and administered by the Interstate Environmental Commission.

As Eric just touched on, the HHPC spearheaded a successful campaign to reopen approximately 2,500 acres of the harbor to shellfish harvesting in 2011. The HHPC worked alongside Nassau County, DEC, the Towns of North Hempstead and Oyster Bay, and other stakeholders for this campaign. This marked a significant milestone—it was the first time shellfishing was permitted in the harbor in 45 years and making it the largest harbor in New York State to reopen in decades. Subsequent efforts, including additional sampling and shellfish planting initiatives, have resulted in further expansions of the program. “We recently received a \$300,000 grant that’s going to be able to plant 2 million oysters seeds per year for the next three years!” said Eric. “We will be able to split the seeding between Hempstead Bay, Manhasset Bay and Oyster Bay to boost the oyster populations in each of the bays and help filter nitrogen.” This serves as a prime example of successful collaboration among the protection committees to protect the harbors.



2,500 acres of shellfish beds reopened. Photo credit: Eric Swenson.

The Protection Committees periodically convene to discuss regulations, legislation, funding, and jointly communicate to state and federal agencies on Island-wide issues. Collaboration extends to projects like Coordinated Environmental Solutions for Septic Problems Occurring On Long Island (C.E.S.S.P.O.O.L.), which raises awareness around the problems with cesspools and septic tanks and while providing

homeowners with tools for proper maintenance. "The Committees' collaborative initiatives and shared advocacy efforts have been successful in fostering environmental resilience and sustainability across the island," remarked Eric, underscoring the impactful collective work of the protection committees.

Looking ahead, the Hempstead Harbor Protection Committee remains steadfast in its commitment to environmental stewardship. From navigating the intricacies of stormwater permits, educating the public about septic systems, to spearheading habitat restoration projects, their vision transcends municipal boundaries. In their pursuit of a healthier, more resilient harbor, the HHPC stands as an example of the transformative power of collaboration and collective action.

You can find more information about all of Long Island's Protection Committees at the links below.

- [**Manhasset Bay Protection Committee**](#)
 - [**Cold Spring Harbor/Oyster Bay**](#)
 - [**Peconic Estuary Protection Committee**](#)
 - [**Northport Harbor Water Quality Protection Committee**](#)
 - [**Accabonac Protection Committee**](#)
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