

Boaters call on town to dredge waters

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By Phil Corso

North Shore boaters are making waves over a lack thereof.

Members of the Smithtown Bay Yacht Club and the Stony Brook Yacht Club have been kicking up sand for weeks with hopes that county and town officials would throw them a lifesaver and dredge the waters where the Stony Brook and Porpoise Channels merge on their way out into Smithtown Bay along the North Shore. And while there has been some support vocalized via elected leaders, action is still pending.

Members of both yacht clubs, though fierce competitors when the two cast off in interclub fishing contests, came together in the name of public safety this boating season when they penned a letter on June 2 to Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone (D). Using urgent language, commodores for both groups, including Mike Kozyrski and Kevin Rooney of Smithtown and Denis Lynch of Stony Brook, asked for a quick dredging of the channel leading out to Smithtown Bay in the name of boater safety.

“At dead low tide, there is oftentimes less than a foot of water in the channel leading out into the Long Island Sound,” Kozyrski said. “Should a boater experience a serious medical emergency out on the water, the bay constable or other emergency personnel may be unable to transit the channel in order to assist them. In our opinion, this is a personal tragedy simply waiting to happen.”

Rooney, coordinator of the dredging project for the Smithtown Bay Yacht Club, said the low-tide and low-water situation has reached a “critical stage” due to the continued shifting of sand and bottom material into the channel.

“It is not an overstatement to say that the very lives of our members, their families and all other boaters are potentially in serious jeopardy due to inaction by various government agencies to prioritize and complete the necessary dredging of the Smithtown Bay channel,” he said. “The situation is dire. And it is totally unacceptable.”

In their letter, the commodores said the area in question was mostly limited to where Stony Brook and Porpoise Channels merged. Navigation buoys turn in a northwesterly direction there, leading into the bay and out into the Long Island Sound. If not dredged properly, the boaters argued that personnel could be unable to reach someone in need of assistance from the shorelines of Port Jefferson or Eaton’s Neck.

“By the time they arrive, it may be too late,” Lynch said.

Bellone, who has put his administration at the forefront of the fight to improve water quality on Long Island, expressed the importance of dredging earlier this year when his administration announced the completion of a project at Champlin Creek in the Town of Islip. A spokeswoman from his office said the Town of Brookhaven submitted a formal request this week before the county's dredge project screening committee, which will consider making the area a part of the dredging program.

Earlier this month, Brookhaven Town Supervisor Ed Romaine (R) requested that Suffolk County dredge more than a dozen spots across the town for the 2016-2017 dredging season, including the waters of Stony Brook.

"Dredging our waterways is essential for both the economic and ecologic health of our region," said Romaine, who is a past member of the Suffolk County Dredge Project Screening Committee. "Keeping these channels safe, open and usable on a consistent basis is essential for the health of these waterways, and for boaters to safely enjoy during the summer months."

The commodores said they hoped lawmakers would put the channel on a regular maintenance dredging schedule in order to allow unlimited access to the Long Island Sound for both boaters and emergency personnel. They, along with other activists across the North Shore, have started a grass roots lobbying campaign with the goal of expediting that kind of schedule.

"This is not about boater convenience," Kozyrski said. "This is simply about the health and safety of all boaters from our two towns – something clearly needs to be done and we hope that our county and town officials feel the same sense of urgency that we do for the safety of our club members, friends and neighbors."