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OPINION

Critics making waves on water bill

State lawmakers try to satisfy concerns, but opposition to measure still lingers



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There is an ancient proverb that says:

Beware of anyone who says they support clean water.

OK, not really, but one could draw that lesson from recent events surrounding the attempt by two local legislators to craft a bill to protect our water.

The legislation, which seeks to reduce the amount of nitrogen polluting Long Island's waters, has been controversial. Opposition was expected.

But critics, who agree we need to protect our water, are playing a disingenuous game.

It all came to a head at a public meeting held last week under the auspices of the Long Island Regional Planning Council, a meeting that included town and village officials and featured various lines of attack on the legislation.

Usually, vigorous public debate is a good thing. The more,

the merrier. But the criticism in this case was cynical, because it was directed at a piece of legislation that for all practical purposes no longer exists.

The critics knew the bill's sponsors, State Assemb. Robert Sweeney (D-Lindenhurst) and State Sen. Kenneth LaValle (R-Port Jefferson), are working hard on changes to the measure — changes in response to objections raised by critics at meetings they had with the legislators and environmentalists helping to craft the bill. And the critics were told their complaints would be addressed in the revamped legislation. But they still held a meeting to blast the very things they were promised would be altered.

Most notably, village mayors said the bill, which would create a state commission to monitor compliance with new nitrogen standards, would usurp local authority over land-use issues. The mayors were told that would be changed, and their local power would not be diminished. The continued protests have some involved wondering



The appearance of brown tide in Flanders Bay in August.

DOUG KUNTZ

whether some other game is being played.

Sweeney and LaValle made clear from the start the legislation was a "for input only" bill, offered only as a starting point for discussion. And there has been plenty of feedback.

Farmers questioned the wisdom of a one-size-fits-all nitrogen standard. That was altered.

Town supervisors wanted more elected, rather than appointed, officials on the commission. Done.

But the attacks continue. Among the strangest: the insistence that the science behind setting new nitrogen standards is weak, and that nitrogen is not the principal threat to water. Both claims are absurd.

Nitrogen has increased 200 percent in the aquifer that supplies most of our drinking water. And while it's true other contaminants also threaten drinking water, nitrogen is the culprit in the increasing number of red tides and brown tides

fouling our waterways, the disappearing marshes and wetlands, and the damage done to shellfish.

Good things are happening in the clean water battle. Nassau County is working to get an ocean outfall pipe that would release treated sewage from the Bay Park plant into the ocean instead of the bays. Officials at various levels of government in Suffolk are planning a program to test advanced wastewater treatment facilities. Suffolk Executive Steve Bellone wants to hook up more of the county to sewers, a good idea subject to the limits of financing.

The Sweeney-LaValle legislation would be another step forward. No one, least of all the sponsors, said the original bill was perfect. They invited comment and got it. Now it's time for critics who were heard to stop and let the process produce new legislation.

And if their concerns are addressed, they need to step up and unequivocally express their support.

Unless there's something else at work they're not saying.

Michael Dobie is a member of Newsday's editorial board.