



TOWN OF SHELTER ISLAND

Town Hall
P.O. Box 970
38 North Ferry Road
Shelter Island, NY 11964-0970

March 28, 2024

Re: Water Quality Test Results

Dear Center Resident:

We are writing you because you live, or own a home or a business, near the Shelter Island Center where the Town recently conducted a voluntary water quality testing program. This letter provides you with information about the testing program but should not be used as a substitute for professional advice.

In summary,

- The Town tested 169 private wells in and around the Town Center for nitrate contamination and bacteria.
- 8 wells had water which the EPA considers unsafe either because of high nitrate concentration or bacteria contamination.
- 11 wells had drinking water which the EPA considers unsafe because of bacteria contamination
- 75 additional wells showed nitrate concentrations which have been associated with adverse health effects and at levels which the EPA recommends that action be taken to reduce the contamination.
- The Town recommends that you get your well water tested (unless you have done so recently) and follow professional advice based on your test results.

The Town's testing program focused on nitrates because that's been the historic worry in the Center. The Town also tested for bacteria contamination as bacteria can also come from wastewater systems. Nitrates from lawn fertilizer can also contaminate drinking water wells.

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA),

- Bacteria is a cause for immediate concern whenever it is found in drinking water.
- With respect to nitrates,
 - Drinking water should not have more than **10 milligrams/liter** of nitrates because higher concentrations pose a health risk for babies less than six months old and the elderly.
 - According to the Suffolk County Department of Health Services (SCDHS) steps should be taken to reduce the contamination when nitrate concentrations are more than **5 milligrams/liter** to prevent the problem from getting worse. In addition, some studies have linked prolonged exposure to drinking water with nitrate concentrations at or above this level to an elevated risk of cancers and birth defects.

- The health concerns from nitrates in drinking water are caused by drinking and cooking, not from bathing, cleaning, or washing your clothes or dishes.

The testing area is shown on the enclosed map and the test results for the entire testing area are shown in the table below:

Total Number of Wells Tested	169
Number of Wells with Bacteria Contamination	11
Number of Wells with Nitrate Concentration Greater than 10 milligrams/liter	8
Number of Wells with Nitrate Concentration Between 5 and 10 milligrams/liter	75
Number of Wells with Nitrate Concentration Less than 5 milligrams/liter	94

To get a general idea of the test results near where you live, find your home or business on the attached map and look at the results in the immediate area.

While these test results provide a general indication of nitrate contamination in the Center, **do not use these test results to decide whether your well water is safe to drink.** The water in a particular well can be affected by many factors such as the distance between the well and nearby septic tanks, the well's design (depth, material etc) and condition, the surface gradient around the well, soil quality, etc. The only way to determine the quality of the water in your well is to get it tested.

Next Steps...

Because 5% of the wells tested show nitrate concentrations exceeding 10 milligrams/liter, and 49% of the wells tested show nitrate concentrations exceeding 5 milligrams/liter, the Town is following the EPA's guidance and exploring solutions.

The Town is evaluating the feasibility of various remediation options for the subject area. However, at this time, the Town does not know which remediation options are the most feasible, what homes & businesses it would serve, what it would cost, and who would pay for it.

To keep the contamination from getting worse, the Town is evaluating tighter rules about fertilizer application and promoting the installation of more advanced septic systems. However, it is unclear how effective these measures will be at reducing nitrogen levels in our drinking water supply or how long it may take to realize significant nitrogen reductions.

What You Can Do...

While the Town considers long term options, the Town recommends that you...

1. **Have your well water tested** (unless you already know the results for your well). The Suffolk County Department of Health (<https://suffolkcountyny.gov/Departments/Health-Services/Environmental-Quality/Water-Resources/Private-Well-Water-Testing-Program>) charges \$100 to test private well water, though it may take several months to get results. Private companies may conduct a test more quickly but may charge more. Based on the test results, you may want to consider:

- a. **Buying bottled water** for drinking and cooking.
 - b. **Installing a nitrate removal system** for the faucets you use for drinking water, cooking and making ice. Neither boiling water nor filters available at retail stores removes nitrates. Talk to an expert about your options.
2. Make sure your **septic system is operating properly**. Get it inspected by a qualified expert. Follow an expert's recommendation about how often you should have your tank pumped.
 3. **Follow the Suffolk County fertilizer rules** when you fertilize your lawn and garden. Fertilizer (which contains nitrogen) that is applied during the wrong time of the year or in excessive amounts leaches into groundwater and can contaminate your well.
(<https://healthylawns.suffolkcountyny.gov/>)

Where you can learn more...

You can learn more about nitrates in drinking water at this US EPA website:

<https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/national-primary-drinking-water-regulations>

You can learn more about the Town's water quality testing program and about water on Shelter Island at these websites:

<https://www.shelterislandtown.us/water-quality>

<https://www.shelterislandtown.us/s/WQI-App-Requirement-1-Flowchart-and-Process-Summary-2023-08-01.pdf>

<https://www.shelterislandtown.us/s/WQI-App-Requirement-2-Funding-Policy-and-Restrictions-2023-08-01.pdf>

<https://www.shelterislandtown.us/s/WQI-App-Requirement-3-Application-Form-and-Instructions-2023-08-01-3y9a.pdf>

You can attend an information session about the water quality issue near the Shelter Island Center:

Date: May 5
Time: 5:30 pm
Place: Shelter Island Library

Contaminated drinking water is a serious issue. The Town is taking steps to address the problem, both now and in the long term. We all live on one Island and we rely on one aquifer. The Town Board is confident that our community will come together and make sure that we all have safe water to drink.

Sincerely,

Shelter Island Town Board