

HOW'S THE WATER?

By Patricia Aitken,
Friends of the Bay executive director

Hempstead Harbor's Remarkable Turnaround

Congratulations to the Hempstead Harbor Protection Committee and the Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor. Their cooperative efforts – municipalities, citizens and agencies coming together to solve a problem – have resulted in the reopening of the outer area of Hempstead Harbor for shellfishing. 2500 acres will now be available for shellfishing. This is a tremendous accomplishment. At one point, the harbor had sewage spills, industrial waste and rotting barges.

The HHPC set a goal of reopening the shellfish beds in 1998. The Department of Environmental Conservation has very strict standards for certifying waters for shellfish harvesting, and the DEC has to see consistent results for years before allowing the waters to be opened. The HHPC, the Town of Oyster Bay and the Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor each assisted the DEC in the collection of samples. Beginning in 2004, the DEC's Bureau of Marine Resources initiated a sanitary survey of the area after observing commercial shellfish harvesters working in Long Island Sound, just east of Matinecock Point.

Routine water quality monitoring conducted over the next four years indicated that water quality in outer Hempstead Harbor was meeting the bacteriological criteria for certified areas, where shellfish can be taken for human consumption. Results consistently showed that levels of fecal bacteria in the area sampled are meeting the stringent state and federal standards. With these positive results, hard clam samples were then obtained from the area and tested for the presence of various metals, PCBs, dioxins, furans, pesticides, and radioactive elements. The data was reviewed by the New York State Department of Health which concluded that the potential exposure from

eating shellfish from the newly certified waters was not a health concern. The next step was for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to conduct a required dye study at the Glen Cove Wastewater Treatment Facility to determine the range of its discharge. Finally, the DEC conducted a shoreline survey to determine any areas where there may be localized areas of concern that would warrant those areas continuing to be restricted to shellfish harvesting.

After going through a public comment period and responding to comments, the DEC announced the opening date of June 1. Oyster Bay Town Supervisor John Venditto stated: "Preserving and enhancing water quality is an environmental legacy for which I would like my administration to be remembered. I am very proud of the role the Town played in bringing about the reopening of Hempstead Harbor to shellfishing. Working with the Hempstead Harbor Protection Committee, the Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor and other groups and governmental agencies, it is a testament to what can be accomplished when residents and government work together. Everyone involved is to be commended. The work is not done, though, and the Town remains committed to working toward the day when the remainder of the harbor will be open to shellfishing."

This will be the largest harbor to reopen in New York State in decades. This is especially significant when viewed in the context of the harbor's condition as recently as in 1971. In October of that year, *Newsday* saw fit to publish a six page expose entitled "Who's Killing Hempstead Harbor?" The article painted the bleakest of pictures with A. Harry Brenowitz, head of the Adelphi University Marine Sciences Institute, proclaiming that the harbor was dying.

There are many factors that contributed to the harbor's remarkable turnaround. Credit must first go to the citizens group, the Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor (the Coalition) which formed in 1986 and began its award-

winning water quality monitoring program in 1992. Their focus started the ball rolling, with both the public and with local governments. In 1995, former Sea Cliff Mayor Ted Blackburn and then-NYS Assemblyman Tom DiNapoli (now New York State Comptroller) conceived the idea and formed the inter-municipal Hempstead Harbor Protection Committee (HHPC) under which the nine local governments that surround the harbor all signed an agreement to work cooperatively toward its improvement. With the creation of the HHPC, Long Island's first intermunicipal watershed effort was formed. It, in turn, has spawned the creation of at least five other similar groups.

Friends of the Bay extends our congratulations to the Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor, and the Hempstead Harbor Protection Committee. Together we DO make a difference!

This Week's Results

The dissolved oxygen levels were at levels greater than 6.0 mg/L at all of the sites Friends of the Bay monitored this week. Levels at 5.0 mg/L of DO are considered to be healthy for all marine organisms. The water temperature is cool, with temperatures as low as 13.63 centigrade. We can hope that with the sun returning, the water temperatures will rise to more seasonal levels!

Our water quality monitoring season began on April 4th and will continue until the end of October. If you are interested in assisting in our effort to preserve and protect the waters of the Oyster Bay/Cold Spring Harbor estuary, or want to report an activity that may be threatening the estuary/watershed please visit us online at www.friendsofthebay.org or give us a call at 922-6666. Friends of the Bay's mission is to preserve, protect and restore the ecological integrity and productivity of the Oyster Bay/Cold Spring Harbor estuary and the surrounding watershed.