

## Cleanup could strain budgets of Chesapeake Bay states

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Don't get Bridgeville Town Commissioner Jay Mervine wrong. He's all for environmental improvement.

But in a part of the state where residents are struggling just to get by, it's hard to convince people that sometimes costly environmental upgrades to municipal infrastructure make economic sense.

"It make take 30 years to get any results," Mervine said. "How come you're making us change our entire infrastructure in five years?"

Delaware, like other Chesapeake Bay states, is under pressure from the federal Environmental [Protection](#)

Agency to quickly reduce nitrogen and phosphorous levels going to tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay from both [wastewater treatment plants](#) and runoff from the land.

But in communities like Bridgeville, Greenwood, Seaford and Laurel, the financial impact could be significant, local leaders said Tuesday.

They gathered with state environmental officials for a workshop geared to the state's Chesapeake Bay communities. Much of the workshop was aimed at helping local governments find, apply for and win grants for infrastructure improvement.

Seaford City Manager Dolores Slatcher said that to do major upgrades, Seaford likely would need to go to referendum to get permission to borrow money.

"What happens when the public says no?" she said. "The mood of the community is 'no more,' " she said.

Officials from Bridgeville, Greenwood and Georgetown said they faced the same reaction.

Delaware is a headwater state, meaning that Chesapeake Bay tributaries like the Choptank and Nanticoke rivers begin here. The state is one of seven that was required to develop plans to reduce nitrogen, phosphorous and sediment going to the Chesapeake and to monitor progress in reducing those pollution loads. The bottom line is a requirement to take steps to reduce the loads by 60 percent over the next 14 years. States must show progress along the way.

Among the key targets in Delaware are updating older wastewater treatment plants and reducing stormwater and sediment runoff.

Frank Piorko, director of the state Division of Watershed Stewardship, said while the state has low-interest loan money available through a revolving fund, municipal officials made a great point Tuesday.

"To use it, you need the capacity to borrow," he said. "I can't imagine the position you are in."

Piorko said he understood that municipal officials were facing two key issues: a technological limit to what is possible and a debt ceiling of how much money residents are willing to allow them to borrow.

Laurel-area real estate agent Fred Sponseller said he's concerned about the environment and is a volunteer in the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance Creek Watch program, but, he wondered: "Does anyone ever say no? We can't afford it. We're not going to do it."

The federal incentive forcing the issue for Delaware officials is the potential loss of federal grants and a federal takeover of water [quality](#)

 programs.

“We’re trying to move forward in the way that makes the most sense for Delaware,” said Jen Walls, with the watershed stewardship program.

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