

Development threatens the nature of Cape Cod

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By **MARK H. ROBINSON**

It rankles me when I hear such leading questions as: Are efforts to preserve more open space on Cape Cod "hurting our economy" or "driving up land prices" to make housing unaf-



fordable.

First, the enemy of affordable housing

prices on the Cape is the same enemy of affordable open space acquisitions: the insatiable demand for Cape Cod by those from elsewhere who want a piece of it. For second homes. For retirement. For speculative investment. None of us can compete with those carpetbags of cash.

Second, the amount

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Robinson: Land bank preserved only about 1 percent of Cape acreage

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of land being preserved is not significant on a county-wide land use scale. Perhaps 1 percent of the Cape was set aside from development during the land bank era (the last six years.) And the types of lands being acquired as open space – near wellfields or along ponds, marshes and waterways – are not conducive to denser, more affordable housing development anyway.

Finally, it doesn't matter what I think; Cape Codders have already spoken. They want more open space. Majorities in every one of the 15 towns supported the land bank. They voted their wallet,

the ultimate opinion poll, choosing to tax themselves extra sums for that specific purpose. The people were right then and still are. Almost every land-bank purchase put before the voters at town meetings has been approved.

But what I really wanted to discuss was the greatest threat to environmental protection on the Cape. It's that same old enemy: us. Too many of us, sprawled across the landscape. The environment can always absorb the insults of the few, but cannot tolerate the affronts of the many.

Our challenge is to turn the numbers in our favor. I start with the premise that every

Cape Codder cares about the quality of the environment. They would not have stayed or moved here if they did not appreciate the Cape in all its natural beauty and for all its outdoor pursuits. So, it is not apathy here as it might be elsewhere. It is more like inertia. We simply have not succeeded in activating people to get more involved in preserving the environment of the Cape.

What can you do? First, join. There are so many dedicated small groups of volunteers, on town boards and nonprofits, everywhere here, but they are all always looking for more members and new ideas and energy. Every household on

Cape Cod ought to belong to the Association to Preserve Cape Cod (www.apcc.org) to learn about regional issues and also belong to their local land trust or watershed association (www.compact.cape.com) to become educated about community resource issues.

Second, give. Most groups run on a shoestring budget (I think it is the Cape Cod way). With more funding, they can do more to promote an environmental agenda. I like the notion that larger national organizations should get smaller checks from each of us because they have a much larger donor base. Smaller,

local groups should get larger checks because it is more meaningful to them and the results are more tangible in the community.

Third, show up. The collective decisions that are made in each of our town halls every weeknight by permitting boards determine what and how and where things get built. While these agencies must issue approvals that meet their guidelines, an audience of heavy breathers helps to ensure that things don't slip by without proper scrutiny. So, whether you go to speak out passionately or simply bear silent witness, go. Your presence is important.

Watching it on local access TV does not count! And the same goes doubly for town meeting, where zoning changes and growth management are considered in general.

Don't let anyone accuse you of NIMBYism, just because you show up to preserve your own backyard. If you didn't care about your own backyard, why should anyone else? What we need to do is take the next step and worry about each other's backyards because in unity, it is said, there is strength. Let's care about our neighborhoods, our towns, and Cape Cod, too. What a magical place this still is. What a shame to lose it.