

Streamline permitting, attract clean business

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By **DICK NEITZ**

We all enjoy the benefits of a healthy environment and open space regardless of political persuasion, environmental activism or business acumen. Here on Cape Cod the long-used buzz words: "the economy IS the environment"



are absolutely true.

However, we all need an occasional

reminder that without a healthy economy and jobs for our residents, the human environment can and does suffer. Reports of hidden poverty, higher crime rates and limited job opportunity are significant threats

Please see **NEITZ IF-5**

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Neitz: Consider people's needs first; How much open space is enough?

continued from F-1

to the human condition of many Cape Codders, whose plight must not be forgotten or minimized. Some even ask what better resource is there to protect than the people who live here?

How much open space is enough? Many Cape towns already own 20 to 30 percent of their total land area. Other Cape towns are more than 70 percent owned by conservation groups, local, state and federal government.

Predictably, as attractive and valuable as our open space is, those publicly acquired parcels have been taken off the tax rolls, and have significantly increased the value of remaining parcels of undeveloped land - exacerbating the affordability of housing for our residents who also face limited employment opportunity here.

Lack of housing at prices to match the earnings of our workforce dramatically affects the economic viability of the

region, but what can we do to help?

The evolution of the Cape Cod Land Bank and the acceptance of the Community Preservation Act (CPA) by many Cape towns have created several interesting options for the future. Under CPA, each town decides what proportion of the 3 percent surcharge on the real estate tax that property owners pay will be used for land acquisition, historic preservation or affordable housing. While at least a 10 percent minimum must go to each category, local priorities may differ based on individual town preferences and needs. Those decisions are being made now, and need citizen input.

Higher density in some selected areas can help bring down the cost per unit, but we also need to look at ways to increase incomes to help our workforce pay the higher home prices here. That entails public recognition of the need for better workforce training and

education for our residents, as well as the importance of keeping the good jobs we have and attracting new and better jobs created by employers investing in our communities. Better paying jobs will definitely help bridge the housing affordability gap.

While concern for the environment and the desire for balanced, smart economic growth are not mutually exclusive, many years of involvement in regional public policy issues has taught me that there are no absolutes. Discussion, analysis and compromise always beat combative disregard for an opposing view, provided both sides understand that the common good of the community is often somewhere in between the hard-line positions of each side.

Cape Cod will continue to grow because its zoning allows it. The biggest challenge is to guide its growth to the appropriate areas where the growth can be sustained ecologically,

and perhaps even provide some net improvement in quality of life for residents and environmental quality. Through the use of technological advances in wastewater treatment, higher density through "smart growth" can actually provide needed revitalization in some areas, more affordable housing AND improve the environment.

Regulation drives up development costs, but economic development experts tell us that the cost of permitting is not prohibitive unless it becomes unpredictable, arbitrary, too lengthy or capricious. Too much regulation drives away new economic development, the potential for expansion of existing enterprises, and the possibility of community benefit in better, higher paying jobs, and a broader municipal tax base.

Developers expect to be treated fairly, particularly when many regions and municipalities often compete for the favorable impact of job

creation to their economies. It's not unusual for developers to follow the path of least resistance, and go where the permitting process is more welcoming to the business venture and the jobs that are created or retained. Some communities even propose the use of state programs to give tax incentives to developers, and float municipal bonds for infrastructure to attract desired development and/or revitalization...and better paying jobs.

Streamlining the permitting process must be included in efforts to counteract the higher housing prices. By attempting to attract/retain employers offering better jobs, our citizens stand a better chance at participating in the American dream of home ownership.

The Cape Cod Commission in particular must recognize what some politicians in Massachusetts are finally beginning to understand: workforce development (jobs) is directly related to the streamlining of

the permitting process for businesses. The House Chairman of the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development announced this week the filing of major legislation to reform and streamline the permitting process in Massachusetts, building on the ideas in Gov. Mitt Romney's pending legislation.

Hopefully, this bipartisan concern will percolate down to local and county officials. If not, Cape Codders need to remind their public officials of the dire need to compete for environmentally friendly businesses that retain and create the higher paying jobs that most communities need and desire.

Today more than ever, a better environment AND better economic conditions can co-exist, but it will take some foresight, tenacity and the will to work hard to get the job done. The winners will be our greatest natural resource: the people of Cape Cod.