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on the cape

Stories beyond the headlines

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It's the end of December, and time to review the big stories of the year. Curiously, bold headlines don't always indicate the really important news – the trends or events that presage change for years to come.

If it were banner headlines alone, the top story of 2003 might well be publication of the controversial book about a Truro murder that revealed little new about the crime, but managed to embarrass the local district attorney.

Actually, the more meaningful story behind the Worthington murder may be a state crime lab so underfunded and poorly staffed that scores of cases were going unsolved because of unacceptable backlogs.

So with or without accompanying headlines, here are some stories that may make the biggest difference to our lives in 2004 and beyond.

Whose preferred alternative?

A sense of inevitability overtook the saga of a Sagamore Rotary "flyover," or, as one consultant called it, "the refined preferred alternative." That same consultant concluded that the economic benefits of the flyover would be eight times greater than its costs. While it became increasingly clear the fly-over would become a reality and bring economic savings to businesses and consumers, it was far less certain what it all would mean to the entire Cape's quality of life as it absorbs more traffic volume along roads constructed for a 1960s population.

community college might play in the future.

Creaking bones

Cape Cod continued to get older. Orleans and Chatham now have the most senior populations per capita in Massachusetts, and virtually every town on the peninsula ranks among the state's 20 most elderly. This is a good-news, bad-news story. Good because retirees bring with them great wealth; bad because the Cape's infrastructure is not keeping up with the demands of an aging population – beginning with an alarming shortage of nurses that underscores a health-care system under stress.

A non-profitable outlook

The Cape Cod Museum of Natural History conceded it could not financially survive without closing for half the year. But the Brewster institution was far from alone among nonprofits suffering a triple whammy of reduced state funding, federal financing and private philanthropy. The shriveling cash flow, however, was leading the nonprofit community to consider ways to exploit other assets, especially volunteers. The Cape Cod United Way launched the Volunteer Center of Cape Cod, and by year's end, nearly 100 nonprofits had joined the organization aimed at recruiting, training and managing volunteers. Meanwhile, school districts across the Cape were formally establishing community service programs for their students, including special awards and academic credits for volunteerism.

It's wastewater, stupid

A growing consensus formed among environmentalists and business interests that Cape Cod must create a bonding authority to finance wastewater treatment facilities and other technologies to replace antiquated septic systems that threaten estuaries and drinking water. The Business Roundtable emerged as the leading edge of this initiative, also advocating that all 15 towns on the Cape revise their planning bylaws to accommodate higher density in village centers and simultaneously limit further development of ever-diminishing open space.

Renewing the economy

While the local battle over a wind farm in Nantucket Sound degenerated into little more than a public relations skirmish, the man behind the initiative planted seeds for what could be an economic transformation on Cape Cod. Jim Gordon donated \$100,000, with no strings attached, to develop a renewable energy curriculum at several institutions of higher learning, including Cape Cod Community College. The gift underscored that renewable technologies promise a new and clean industry for the Cape, along with higher paying jobs. And it emphasized the critical economic development role the

Two-household families

Quietly and steadily, the number of second homes on Cape Cod approached the stock of year-round housing, a key reason home prices continued to increase at double-digit rates. This statistic played out in many ways. One town tried to tax second-home owners more than their full-time neighbors, before calmer heads prevailed. Nonresident taxpayer groups began calling themselves part-time residents and demanded a greater voice at town meetings. Hard-pressed local governments considered new taxes on second-home rental income that so far has fallen below the radar screen.

Change of venue

While most eyes were riveted to local skirmishing over the wind farm, the real battle stealthily shifted to the power corridors of Washington. Even as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers slogged ahead with its environmental impact review, lobbyists were courting lawmakers far removed from Nantucket Sound. The project's future appeared increasingly within the jurisdiction of a House subcommittee chaired by a Wyoming representative and Department of Interior allies not only inclined to support the wind project, but maybe even exempt it from royalty fees and regulations.