

Good news on the waterfront

With all of the talk about how the Cape is going to handle its wastewater, which usually includes some astronomical dollar amount to address it, there's good news to be found.

Dr. Brian Howes of UMass Dartmouth heads up the state's Estuaries Program, which just released its report in the Popponeset Bay watershed/embayment that borders Barnstable and Mashpee.

When we spoke with him last week about the report, he was pretty excited about what was discovered about that system.

Popponeset Bay and its embayments are considered to be among the most nutrient contaminated in all of Southeastern Massachusetts, and howes said it can be saved. Not just in a technical sense, but in a practical, dollar-realistic sense.

Through the restoration and creation of freshwater wetlands in the upper reaches of the system, Howes said that the amount of nitrogen the would eventually reach the lower watershed could be reduced anywhere from 25 to 40 percent.

That's good news for the lower watershed, which includes the heavily populated shorefront areas that add their own serious nutrient load to the system. There will still be a need for Howes calls "the concrete boxes," meaning treatment plants, but with the reduction possible within the freshwater portion of the upper watershed, the number and size of the concrete boxes will be significantly reduced.

That brings the cost down, and brings the willingness of taxpayers and ratepayers to put money toward a solution up.

The goal of the Estuaries Program is to identify the "critical nitrogen loading" for embayments. Put simply, it's a scientific determination of how much bad stuff a system can handle before it starts to fail and die. We are the primary source for

high nitrogen counts, as pretty much everything we flush will eventually make it to the sea. The route to the sea is through our estuaries and coastal embayments.

The proposals coming from the Estuaries Program include a series of steps, including limiting nitrogen at its source and intercepting it before it reaches critical areas. Howes said that it will be a combination of steps, not a single, big remedy that gets nitrogen under control.

While this is good news for the Popponeset embayment, it's also good news for those embayments that Barnstable doesn't share with any other town, Three Bays and the Centerville River systems in particular. These southside embayments have more things in common with Popponeset than they don't, which means that many of the same principles in cleaning them up will apply.

The three Bays report from the estuaries Program is up next, estimated to be released anywhere from 6 months to a year from now, with Centerville, Lewis Bay and Barnstable Harbor on the northside to follow.

There's more good news to be found, according to Howes, who sees Barnstable as being ready to hit the ground running once the watershed reports are released. The town has been working for more than a decade on identifying its wastewater issues and contemplating solutions and is well positioned to get moving once information becomes available.

Wastewater will remain a large issue for Barnstable and the cape, and while lowered, the costs will remain significant. That said, with good science and practical thinkers on our side, what once seemed daunting and impossible appears a little more in reach.

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