

DON'T PANIC: Patriot 11/26/04

Wastewater issues 'manageable'

By David Curran

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Cape Cod has a problem with wastewater. In this it is not alone. But the region is in the forefront in developing solutions.

"Everybody should take some comfort that what the technical reports are showing is the problem is manageable," Andrew Gottlieb, the state Department of Environmental Protection's assistant commissioner for policy and planning, told the Board of County Commissioners last week.

Gottlieb and Brian Howes, director of the Coastal Systems Program at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth's School of Marine Science and Technology, met with the commissioners to report on their institutions' roles in nascent efforts to solve the growing wastewater problem.

They didn't promise a primrose path out of the problems caused by nitrates discharged into the Cape's bays and estuaries.

"They're complex, relatively expensive solutions," Gottlieb said, "but they're manageable."

He vowed that state funding would be forthcoming for "well thought out" management plans.

"We're in it for the long haul," Gottlieb said.

He said the state is focusing its attention on the Cape because the Cape is focusing its attention on the problem.

"The traction has been on the Cape so we're looking to develop some early successes" that can build momentum on and off Cape Cod, said Gottlieb.

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Howes walked the commissioners through the Massachusetts Estuaries Program's recently completed nutrient loading model for Popponeset Bay.

The presentation illustrated the delicate balance of patience and urgency that will be needed as the Cape wades deeper into addressing the issue.

A sense of urgency needs to be maintained so that the early momentum being built by the Popponeset study and another covering a Chatham estuary, as well as an ongoing initiative to establish a regional wastewater collaborative, is not allowed to dissipate.

But patience is needed because each bay, estuary or watershed is unique, and the most cost-effective matrix of solutions for any given watershed takes several years to develop.

"Uncertainty costs a tremendous amount of money," Howes said, and the only way to minimize uncertainty is with adequate data collection and analysis, which takes time.

"People want to fix it tomorrow," he said.

One thing is certain, Gottlieb said: "You can solve the problem without sewerage most of the Cape."

In some locations, Gottlieb said, the technical information is showing that sewerage would be "a big waste of money."

That is not to say, however, that no sewer systems in addition to those that already exist will be needed.

Cutting down on the use of lawn fertilizer isn't going to make a decisive difference, either.

"Only about half the houses on Cape Cod fertilize," Howes said. "They don't do it."

The Popponeset model is one of the first to be produced that identifies not only particular sources of nitrates but can differentiate between those that are

creating problems and those that are being filtered naturally. It makes little sense to devote resources to eliminating sources that, regardless of their quantity, are not part of the problem.

Gottlieb called the modeling "a dynamic tool that's being developed that'll cover every estuary on the Cape," yielding information and options to support "informed discussions" of how to solve each estuary's nitrate problems most cost-effectively.

"It doesn't mean these will be easy conversations to have," Gottlieb cautioned.

After the meeting, Howes downplayed the inescapable implication of the strategy of attacking sources based on the damage they do rather than the quantity of nutrients release: that some property owners will face expensive solutions such as enhanced on-site septic systems or sewer-fed treatment plants serving individual neighborhoods or developments, while others discharging as much or more in the way of nutrients may need to do little.

Howes said in general, as in Popponeset, more expensive solutions are more likely to be needed closer to the water, where property values are higher and the cost of appropriate solutions would be a smaller percentage of the property value.

"There is a vested interest for everybody in town," he added, pointing out that if water quality deteriorates too severely, property values Cape-wide could plummet.

"We're very sensitive to these types of issues," he said.

Bill Doherty, the commissioners' chairman, said many Cape Codders came to the region because of its water resources.

"There are certain responsibilities we need to accept" to maintain the character that has contributed to the Cape's burgeoning growth, Doherty said, "and this is one of them."