

WASTEWATER

Regional program seen as overdue

■ Leaders wrestle with multiple problems in the creation of a Capewide sewage management agency.

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When Maggie Geist recalls the Moonakis River that drew her parents to its Mashpee banks more than 20 years ago, she has to sigh a little.



Maggie Geist

"The longer we delay, the more expensive the infrastructure will be."

But the development boom that swept Barnstable County in the 1980s and 1990s has been tough on the Moonakis, as well as on other estuaries and bays across the Cape.

The problem is nitrogen, Geist says. The nutrient seeps through the Cape's sandy, permeable soil each day from thousands of septic systems, tainting drinking water and ecosystems.

Now, for about a month each year, hideous pools of algae float downriver along the

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Moonakis and into Waquoit Bay, which has become matted with the same ugly detritus from the nearby Mashpee River.

Geist, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod, thinks a coordinated regional solution is long overdue.

Alarmed by the gradual creep of nitrogen pollutants into the Cape's groundwater, estuaries and bays, Geist and a broad coalition of like-minded activists are determined to establish a sweeping new wastewater management authority, which could create a bureaucracy that would require hundreds of millions of dollars to run in coming decades.

Such a transition would be a mammoth undertaking.

Almost 90 percent of homes and businesses on Cape Cod are hooked up to on-site septic systems – compared with just 25 percent of the rest of the country, Geist said. Cape residents pump 12 billion gallons of wastewater a year into the Cape's delicate groundwater aquifer.

Proponents foresee the authority raising the funds necessary to build sewers and treatment plants in targeted areas across the Cape through a likely combination of property taxes, betterment fees, bond financing and grants.

Sobered by the pricey prospect of wrestling the wastewater juggernaut on their own, some municipal leaders seem eager to pass the issue into the hands of a regional authority.

Still, a bedeviling number of unknowns loom large over the proposal.

How will the new authority be paid for? How much will it cost? Will it be a new department under county government, or should it be run as an independent authority, free from the pressure of having to please a particular

political constituency?

Growing concerns

In short, these are questions of funding, accountability, and endless gallons of dirty water.

This coalition, known as the Cape Cod Business Roundtable, has joined county leaders in grappling with the challenge of how to go about establishing the new regional body.

"The way you address it isn't through band-aids," said Barnstable County Assembly Speaker Tom Bernardo, who predicts that wastewater management will be the "single biggest undertaking in the history of Cape Cod."

A Cape Cod Commission report released last year found that the percentage of public wells registering increasing levels of nitrogen rose significantly from 1993 to 2002.

Readings were more troubling on the Outer Cape. A less extensive analysis of 183 small-volume, private wells in Eastham and Wellfleet found nitrogen levels to be approaching state safety levels.

County officials say they're serious about wastewater concerns, and some leaders are even pondering ways to blitz the media and voting public with an elaborate awareness campaign.

County, town and business officials have their work cut out for them. They'd have to have a plan ready by an April deadline in order to put a proposal on a public referendum by November.

A new tax?

Arguably the most controversial aspect of a new authority would be the question of funding.

According to Geist, rough estimates of the Cape's wastewater needs – for sewers and treatment plants – run in the range of \$1 billion over the next 20 years alone.

"We've used that number in front of some wastewater engineers, who have said, gee, that's pretty conservative," Geist said.

"Nobody knows how much wastewater infrastructure will cost on Cape Cod. The longer we delay, the more expensive the infrastructure will be."

It's an endeavor the towns have been hard-pressed to tackle alone.

In North Falmouth last November, public bids for a \$5.4 million treatment plant came in 77 percent higher than expected. The town is still mulling its options.

One likely funding source for a regional plan would be a new property tax that would be shared by homeowners and businessowners alike. The tax, according to Geist, would allow the authority to cover the interest rate on bond financing. The bond money could then be lent to towns at low- or zero-interest rates for sewer and treatment plant construction.

But would people go for a new tax?

A legislative referendum last November that sought to abolish the state income tax was barely defeated at the polls, and its popularity drove home the public's disaffection for taxes in a period of economic stagnation.

However, on Cape Cod, public referendums over the past decade have helped establish new taxes to fund the Cape Cod Commission and the Land Bank, an effort to protect open space.

Many town officials say it's too soon to endorse a specific tax or funding approach without knowing more about the proposal.

But in recent interviews, Barnstable Town Manager John Klimm and Town Councilor J. Gregory Milne both noted that user fees would be a logical strategy, and a way to encourage state and federal matching grants.

"What is Cape Cod if we have polluted estuaries and beach closures?" said

Milne, president of the Cape Cod Selectmen's and Councilor's Association.

Estimates of wastewater needs in the town of Barnstable begin at \$200 million to cover new sewer projects over the course of the next 10 years alone, Klimm said.

Accountability

But who would have authority over such a large pot of money with such serious implications for the long-term environmental health of the Cape? That's the struggle business and county government leaders are discussing.

Regional entities such as the Steamship Authority, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, and the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority have garnered sometimes notorious reputations for political in-fighting, patronage or bureaucracy.

To minimize politicking, some hope to see an authority at once independent from county government and yet funded with public tax dollars.

The best scenario, according to some proponents, is to create an appointed governing board – smaller but otherwise similar in structure to that of the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority – as opposed to an elected board in the vein of the Steamship Authority.

Created by the state legislature in 1984, the MWRA oversees water distribution and sewage treatment for 2.5 million residents from Boston to Worcester. Member communities are represented by an 11-member board of appointed directors.

In addition, a 60-member advisory board serves as a fiscal watchdog.

The Business Roundtable has suggested that the new agency would be run by an executive director and a five-member board of directors appointed by county commissioners.

The board's members would have

ample freedom to pursue wastewater treatment plants, sewers and other potentially pricey solutions to the wastewater issue – without having to worry about running for office.

"A lot of what people in this organization are going to have to do is not going to be popular" with the public, said Elliott Carr, moderator of the Business Roundtable. "The county has to pick the best people they can, and give them the authority to do the job."

Others foresee the authority functioning as a department of county government, much like the county dredge or the office of Human Services, with a staff that answers directly to county leaders.

"I think that having a regional service, that's a regional tax ... with the wastewater expertise we have today, we don't want to reinvent this wheel," said the County Assembly's Tom Bernardo.

But a regional, nonelected board is preferable, according to Geist, because the wastewater issues cuts across town lines.

The solution to the cleanup of Waquoit Bay, for instance, will involve both Falmouth and Mashpee, which both have rivers that feed into the bay, and part of the watershed is also in Sandwich.

Thus, efforts to protect the bay would involve coordination between at least three towns. That coordination is currently lacking.

"One thing that we know about Cape Cod is that it tends to be very parochial," Klimm said. "The town of Barnstable has five fire districts."

And according to the Association to Preserve Cape Cod, nine towns share major bodies of water, while surrounding watersheds may extend into several additional towns.

"A drop of water doesn't respect town boundaries," Geist said.