

Officials gear up for wastewater agency crusade

By **FREDERICK MELO**
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Ask Fred Fenlon what he thinks of the county's burgeoning plan to establish a regional wastewater authority, and he's all ears.

"I think it's good. Not only good, it's necessary," said the retired insurance executive, who has studied the gradual creep of nitrogen into the Cape's estuaries and bays as a former member of an Eastham wastewater committee.

But given the stagnant economy, Fenlon, like many Cape residents, balks at the prospect of assessing property owners a new tax to sup-

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Authority: Tough sell for county

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port the authority, one of many funding mechanisms that has been suggested.

As county leaders and civic activists grapple with the prospect of creating a wastewater authority, they're keenly aware that residents like Fenlon could be their greatest allies, or toughest opponents.

With skeptics in mind, they've begun to debate questions of timing and public outreach.

"On Cape Cod, we've never paid for sewage treatment, and we seem to think we shouldn't have to," said Maggie Geist, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod.

"And yet, for the rest of the country, it's a given. It's part of everybody's tax bill."

Under the county charter, county commissioners already have the authority to create a quasi-public agency, according to the Cape Cod Business Roundtable.

Proponents would like to see the proposed authority in place as soon as possible.

County leaders, however, are leaning toward a more elaborate — and somewhat slower — approach, involving a public referendum this year or next.

The commissioners acknowledged many Cape residents already see the importance of creating a regional authority to help towns build sewers and

treatment plants in targeted, high-growth areas.

Towns, otherwise, would be at a loss to go it alone. Conservative estimates of the Cape's wastewater needs over the next 20 years alone begin at \$1 billion.

The proposed authority is a central component of a plan to direct growth away from natural resource areas, such as woods, wetlands and watersheds, by helping towns concentrate development in designated areas, such as village centers.

The county commissioners are creating a blue-ribbon committee to help develop an organizational structure for a wastewater authority.

The panel will help commissioners evaluate potential costs, benefits and revenue sources, and give advice on whether to put the proposal before voters.

"I think it's very important that it go to the public, and that the public say whether or not they want this," county Commissioner Mary LeClair said.

Previous referendums, she said, spurred the creation of the Cape Cod Land Bank, the Cape Cod Commission and the county Assembly of Delegates.

Meanwhile, local state legislators would focus on drafting a bill to fund and establish the authority.

But to hold a referendum next November, proponents would have to file papers for a ballot initiative with town clerks by

July.

"I think in the fall, a ballot question would focus the discussion a little, and it would be a vehicle to educate people about this issue," state Sen. Robert O'Leary, D-Barnstable, said.

But that would give county leaders little time to sway skeptics such as Fenlon to support a new authority with powers of taxation. County leaders argue that some residents and municipal leaders will balk at the price tag unless the county has more time to drum up support.

"Just how far can you go?," Fenlon said. "For example, the Land Bank tax. When one-third of Eastham is in the National Seashore, how much open space can you have? The taxes that cut across everything ... there's no latitude."

Those concerns were echoed by John, a retired federal agent living in Sandwich, who asked that his last name not be used.

He said he doubts the documented increase of nitrogen in estuaries, bays and drinking water could pose a universal health risk, or a widespread threat to the environment.

"One thing I don't want to hear (about) is anything that is going to cost me more money, because I'm just eking by paying my taxes."

"My taxes in Sandwich have gone up 33½ percent, with the revaluation of my home. We're on a fixed income. ... You're hammering the average citizen."

Thomas Bernardo, speaker of the county Assembly, advocates waiting another year for a referendum. That will give county officials time to fold the question into a public vote on the county's charter review in 2005.

"Fast-tracking something of this magnitude would be a mistake. I don't see this happening in a referendum this fall," he said. "We absolutely need the towns to feel that they are partners," in order to obtain the support of state leaders, "so we can say this is how we — with a capital W — collectively want to proceed."

In their seven-page position paper describing the wastewater "enterprise," the commissioners wrote: "The campaign should be run like a political campaign ... Become well known on the issue to the local media. Identify friendly members of the media, neutralize or otherwise be prepared to deal with hostile media."

"If we went town by town, to talk to the individual selectmen about this, we'd get run out of town," explained William Doherty, county commission chairman, during a recent meeting with the Cape Cod Business Roundtable. "As far as the regional part, we absolutely could not agree more," he said. "I think there is an appetite to support it on a regional basis."

But several roundtable members questioned how the county would respond if voters reject

Cost may sway public opinion

When state officials projected the cost for the Boston Central Artery/Tunnel Project in 1982, they pegged the sum at \$2.6 billion.

But the Big Dig is expected to cost \$14.6 billion when it is completed next year.

As Barnstable County leaders begin to fashion plans for a regional wastewater authority, the specter of costly public works projects looms large.

One of the key questions they'll be expected to answer: What's the financial or environmental cost to the Cape if no authority is created?

To answer that question, it's important to present the public with a detailed cost-benefit analysis, said David Tuerck, executive director of the Beacon Hill Institute, a

conservative economic research firm at Suffolk University.

"In the case of both the (Massachusetts Water Resources Authority) and the Big Dig, we know that public projects of this kind end up costing a lot more than planned," Tuerck said.

"That's not only because of inflation, but because of enhancements that are found necessary a long the way."

Politics also plays a part in ballooning price tags.

"These projects are notoriously vulnerable to pressures from unions. Because they're so big, they end up being highly politicized and end up being a gravy train for vested interests, environmentalists and the labor unions, particularly."

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the idea, even a non-binding referendum. "Before we support having a referendum, we better be damn sure we're going to win it," Cape Air president Dan Wolf said.

Margo Fenn, executive director of the Cape Cod Commission and a roundtable member, said the proposed authority will

have to be marketed as a solution to wastewater problems that could undermine the health, beauty and economic vitality of the region.

"At a gut level, if you go out to the voters and say do you want to create another bureaucracy, I think the answer is most likely going to be no," Fenn said.