

Create agency to better manage wastewater

Last of four parts

By **MAGGIE GEIST**

In recent years, town after town on Cape Cod has reported declining water quality in coastal

bays and freshwater ponds. Fast-growing algae have replaced valuable fin-fish and shell-fish habitat in our estuaries; bathing beach closures have joined shell-fish bed closures as commonplace summer occurrences; and pond-front residents have noted that algae blooms have turned once sparkling clear waters a milky green.

We now know that these deleterious effects are largely due to our dependence on inadequate on-site wastewater treatment. Across the Cape, close to 90 percent of our buildings rely on on-site septic systems.

There are several compelling reasons why a regional approach to solving this massive problem makes sense.

The first reason concerns our geography. There are more than 60 coastal embayments and hundreds of freshwater ponds on Cape Cod, many of which suffer from deteriorating water quality.



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That fact in itself would favor a comprehensive regional approach.

Support for a regional approach is even more apparent when one considers that many of these bays and ponds cross town boundaries and their watersheds often include multiple towns. Waquoit Bay, Popponesset Bay and Pleasant Bay come to mind.

The second reason is financial. Towns do not have the financial resources to tackle this problem alone. Although several towns are developing wastewater management plans, none is certain of where the funding will come from to build needed facilities, and many more towns have not addressed this problem at all.

The third reason is political. We will need to convince the state and federal government to provide some financial assistance to the Cape. The likelihood of persuading the government to help will be much enhanced if we come forward with a regional plan, and if we demonstrate our willingness to finance a substantial part of the cost ourselves.

For all of these reasons, the Cape Cod Business Roundtable recommends the creation of a county agency whose mission would be to seek and administer funds for wastewater infrastructure projects. The proposed agency would work with existing county functions and coordinate closely with state programs, such as the Massachusetts Estuaries Project and the state Ry-

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volving Loan Fund.

The Roundtable also proposes passage of state legislation to provide a funding mechanism for infrastructure projects. The state legislation would include a tax or fee on Cape properties.

The Roundtable recommends that everyone who is not connected to an existing treatment system pay some small amount, preferably based on water use. The justification is that everyone uses water and generates wastewater.

Approximately \$10 million could be raised annually if the average residential or commercial property owner contributed \$60 to \$65 a year. This funding, while nowhere near the amount that will be necessary to solve all of our wastewater problems, could be used to bond larger amounts of money.

The state legislation would also provide some matching funds

from the commonwealth and other incentives for the towns.

The county agency would function as a regional bank to fund wastewater facilities. Towns would be eligible for lower interest rates than they would pay if acting on their own. In addition to funds from towns and state matching funds, the agency would aggressively pursue grants to increase the amount of money available to the towns.

As Cape Cod takes steps to address the lack of adequate wastewater infrastructure, it is imperative to remember that providing wastewater infrastructure without a plan for where growth should and should not occur is a recipe for more growth in the wrong places. Solving our wastewater infrastructure problem must go hand in hand with comprehensive planning that addresses other critical issues on Cape Cod, such as directing growth to appropriate areas, protecting open space and providing workforce housing.

No matter which part of the Cape we hail from, no matter which town on the Cape we call home, the waters around us and the waters beneath us connect us all to each other. It's time for a regional solution to our critical water quality problem.

Maggie Geist is executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod and the coordinator of the Business Roundtable.