

Water works

2004

■ Barnstable County appears serious about running a regional wastewater treatment agency. Let the discussion begin.

The three Barnstable County commissioners have taken the bit in their teeth to form a regional wastewater agency.

This may be the truly significant, politically powerful job that finally raises the county's visibility.

A few years ago, county officials felt so misunderstood and underappreciated that they put together a road show and went to the hinterlands (Eastham, for example) to explain what the county government did and why it was impor-

tant to defend Barnstable as a unique, workable regional government compared to the disenfranchised counties in other parts of the state.

We confess we still need occasional reminders. Except for the Cape Cod Commission's newsy, often controversial



Wastewater management

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work, the real estate record-keeping at the Registry of Deeds upon which our wealth depends, and the health department's timely beach-water testing, we don't run into county works or county workers on a day-to-day basis.

But if the proponents of a regional authority can convince voters and the state Legislature that wastewater disposal needs this specialized tool, then county government will have engineered a leadership coup for a project pivotal to the Cape's long-term livability.

If it serves to efficiently finance and build treatment plants in critical environmental zones, and allows the kind of smart development that makes the Cape a better place to live and do business, we won't begrudge the bureaucracy that grows around this vital service.

Judging by their position paper, the commissioners realize a wastewater authority will be controversial and the financing a challenge that will have to be carefully sold to voters:

"We believe that we can find agreement on the idea that it must be regional in nature and that it needs to have a strong defensible financial model to provide adequate funding... We believe that, to a great degree, we can create a level of independence that allows for accountable action, but it is here that we must be careful not to suggest or imply that it can or will become an MWRA (Massachusetts Water Resources Authority or similar agencies) quasi-independent from direct accountability for the management and control of their costs to the voters that established them."

The first step in the commissioners' game plan was the assembly of a blue ribbon committee to define the purpose, financing and responsibilities of such an agency. That committee – mostly elected county and town officials, with county assembly speaker Tom Bernardo as chairman – has now had two meetings and is developing a mission statement.

Doubters have raised legitimate questions about the need for such an agency, and its size and power. The time has come to ask those questions and join the discussion.

The blue-ribbon committee's work will soon be a link on the county web site: barnstablecounty.org