

Committee pushes for action on wastewater

By Doreen Leggett
dleggett@cnc.com

If a countywide referendum on wastewater solutions is going to pass, every town needs to be supportive. And Barnstable County's new Blue Ribbon committee is gearing up to make that happen.

"The train doesn't leave the station without all of us on board," said Tom Bernardo, the Assembly of Delegates representative to the committee. "It has to be from bottom-up and [we] need to reassure towns we aren't going to force something upon them. We feel our role is really a facilitating device that is accountable to the towns."

There has been some concern on the committee that the proverbial train had gotten off track, or at least may have been leaving from the wrong terminal.

The committee's concern is that the Business Roundtable, a group of environmental and business leaders, has mistakenly given the impression that a new wastewater authority needs to be formed, and a vote on the matter has to take place by November. (The roundtable is a member of the committee, but its representative was unable to attend.)

That is not the case, committee members reiterated at their Wednesday morning meeting. The consensus was that an authority may not be needed as the county's health department and the Cape Cod Commission may be able to address the problems in-house. Some committee members also hoped that the roundtable not come up with its own plans.

The committee also voted unanimously that the referendum be postponed to November 2005 so an adequate educational campaign could be waged, and so towns could adequately weigh in on proposals that come forward.

Chatham, represented by Bob Duncanson, and Falmouth, by Amy Lowell, aren't sure that an authority is something their towns would be interested in, especially since it is unclear what its role would be.

"I'm still a little fuzzy on its worth to the towns," said Falmouth's George Huefelder, who brought forward the absent Lowell's concerns.

Frank Sampson of Harwich said that although the referendum was delayed, he believed the committee should actively pursue state and federal funding. He doesn't believe towns would turn down financial aid.

Elliott Carr, moderator of the Business Roundtable, said that he couldn't comment specifically on the committee's comments, as he wasn't there.

But he also said they aren't committed to a referendum question this November and can be flexible on the authority as well.

"We want to get the job done effectively and well, and would support any plan that does that," Carr said.

The Cape has been grappling with high levels of nitrogen, which causes a proliferation of algae and a deterioration of water quality, in its salt water ponds and embayments. Nitrogen, which is coming primarily from septic systems, is also diminishing drinking water quality.

Bernardo said the concerns of the towns would be heavily weighted. Some towns, he said, are far ahead in their wastewater planning, others haven't started.

The committee hopes to "design a financial service that would appeal and be practical regardless of where they are in the process," he said.

If the referendum creates a new bonding authority, the state Legislature will then need to sign off on it.