

APCC backing fee for wastewater management

County's blue ribbon panel grapples with issue

By David Curran

Maggie Geist, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod, told the county's Blue Ribbon Committee on Regional Wastewater this week that her organization continues to believe some sort of fee is needed to resolve the region's water management woes.

The committee met Wednesday after a hiatus of several weeks in a session that was scheduled to focus on defining the group's goals. However, much of the early morning hour-long session was devoted instead to how the group will proceed, and to the different perspectives brought by members who represent various constituencies and have expertise in a variety of areas.

As the meeting was concluding, Margo Fenn, executive director of the Cape Cod Commission, suggested the committee consider bringing in a professional facilitator to guide the goal-setting process, yielding a more effective discussion and more timely results.

"I really think it would help," Fenn

said.

Geist represents the Cape Cod Business Roundtable as well as the preservation organization on the committee. The Business Roundtable, which Geist said has been looking at wastewater issues for "a couple of years," favors a tax or fee, possibly on water use, to pay for solutions to the threat posed by unsound wastewater disposal.

"We believed, and still believe, everybody releases nutrients into the environment and everybody should pay something," Geist said.

But she said the business group is not necessarily wedded to its ideas as the "end-all, be-all" solution.

Geist also told the committee that the business group continues to favor creation of a regional entity as the best way to help towns across the Cape address wastewater issues effectively, both in the political arena and economically.

Considerable diversity of opinion exists on the panel regarding creation of a new regional entity. County Commissioner Bill Doherty pointed to the Cape Light Compact as a model. The compact primarily provides a vehicle for Cape residents and towns to band together voluntarily to negotiate lower prices for electricity than they could obtain separately.

Chatham's Tom Bernardo, speaker

of the county Assembly of Delegates, said he envisions "very cursory involvement" on the part of Barnstable County government, but Doherty disagreed.

Tom Cambareri, who manages water resources programs for the Cape Cod Commission, said wastewater issues on the Cape have many similarities to those faced in the Florida Keys, including funding challenges and the region's mix of on-site private systems and small treatment plants.

"The Florida model shows you can pursue all the money you want, but you need to be able to show what it's for," put in County Administrator Mark Zielinski. "Maybe the county needs to step up now" in developing a regional wastewater plan.

Views on how a new entity would proceed were likewise multifarious. Some members see it as first pursuing funding. Bernardo said the top priority should be identification of funds that could be available to all Cape Cod towns, even though each town faces its own unique constellation of wastewater issues.

Other members suggested a new entity should first establish itself with a foundation of services for all towns on the Cape.

For John Hodgkinson, Orleans' member of the Assembly of Delegates,

public support of any regional entity is critical. For that to happen, he said, the committee must speak with one voice. He called on members to refrain from making independent public statements.

"This engenders anxiety," Hodgkinson said. "It engenders, 'What the hell's going on?'"

He praised the business roundtable for its work on wastewater, but said "at some point" the blue ribbon committee took over the lead role on the issue.

"Let's get on with the good ideas, but we need to have one voice and this committee should be it," he said.

Cambareri pointed to the county's Wastewater Implementation Committee as one of many agencies across the Cape that are working on wastewater issues, using funding from various sources. He sees a value in coordinating such efforts so that, for example, information developed by one agency but applicable to others could be shared, reducing monetary and other costs for all.

"It needs to come through this committee," he said, but he cautioned against excessive centralization due to the sheer volume of work. The committee, he said, needs to have "the maturity to delegate."

The Blue Ribbon Committee will next meet April 14.