

Study: Upgrade wastewater policy

By **FREDERICK MELO**
STAFF WRITER

A few years ago, state legislators approved a novel approach toward waste in Provincetown.

The town's "checkerboard" sewer system would allow it to pick and choose which homes along Commercial and Bradford streets would tie in to a new sewer line.

Homeowners preferring to opt out could continue to rely on Title V septic systems, provided they were in good working order.

Provincetown's staggered approach – which allowed it to build a smaller, more affordable treatment plant – is being touted as one of a number of strategies that could be emulated Capewide.

The Wright-Pierce consulting firm of Topsham, Maine, presented town and county planners yesterday with preliminary recommendations for improving wastewater management on Cape Cod.

The \$55,000 report, still in its

draft form, offers suggestions for when lands and funds are in short supply.

"You need a buffer zone around the treatment plant, because of the noise, the odor," said Wright-Pierce Vice President Michael D. Giggey. "But what happens, increasingly, is towns have fewer and fewer sites" of an appropriate size.

The report, paid for with county funds, was commissioned by the county's Wastewater Implementation Committee.

The draft was described yesterday as a "toolbox" of potential approaches toward wastewater management.

Established in 2002, the WIC is composed of a representative from each Cape town, as well as state and county boards.

Despite widespread interest in keeping Cape waters pristine, wastewater planning has been overshadowed by a certain number of unknowns.

The state Department of Environmental Protection, for in-

stance, is in the midst of a six-year, \$12.5 million study evaluating nitrogen levels at 89 of the state's coastal embayments.

Until the Massachusetts Estuaries Project is complete, however, towns are torn over what wastewater standards to impose on property owners.

According to the report, planning boards are nervous about requiring a homeowner to spend "\$15,000 to \$20,000 for enhanced treatment, only to find ... that a simple Title V upgrade would have sufficed."

"That's really going to set a lot of the threshold for what we need to achieve with our wastewater management efforts," said Barnstable Department of Public Works Director Mark Ells. But in advance of the completed estuaries project, the report recommends 18 interim measures. Tasks are ranked in terms of low, moderate or high potential for "early progress."

They include:

■ Identify prospective sites

for wastewater treatment and disposal.

■ Identify "growth centers" where new development will be channeled, and estimate their sewer needs.

■ Create townwide comprehensive plans for wastewater management.

■ Amend state law to allow "checkerboard" sewer systems.

Still, some residents left yesterday's meeting with as many questions as answers.

"Nothing's been said or done yet. They still haven't put a timetable," said Tom Murphy, a retired chemical engineer from Centerville. "And what is this going to cost me? That's what I'm worried about, and all my neighbors."

In late 2002, state Sen. Robert O'Leary, D-Barnstable, advocated creating an authority that would coordinate wastewater disposal on a Capewide basis.

For a revenue source, however, the new organization would need legislative approval to impose taxes or betterment fees.