

Water strategies are key

By From staff reports

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Anyone who doubts that the Lower Cape's top priority is wastewater treatment ought to read the executive summary of the Orleans Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan Needs Assessment Report.

Prepared by local consultants Wright-Pierce, it puts the town's wastewater situation under a microscope. Those who attended Monday night's public meeting at Snow Library, where the report was unveiled, surely would agree that there are several unsettling findings (see news report, Page 6).

The upshot, according to the report's Summary of Current Needs, is that in order to protect the pristine estuaries and other surface waters that residents

expect – and that the tourists and second-home owners flock here to enjoy – off-site (meaning non-septic) wastewater management is needed for some 2,600 properties, or 56 percent of all developed lots. As vacant lots are developed over the next few decades, and as more seasonal homes convert to year-round use, many additional properties must feed into a wastewater facility, the report noted.

Pulling no punches, it warned that continued degradation of surface waters by nitrogen loading “could lead to sharply reduced fishing and swimming, and the eventual decline in property values.”

The wastewater issue is common to all of the Cape’s towns, but some communities are further ahead than others in management planning. Chatham, for example, has taken the first steps to fund a huge expansion and upgrade of the town’s existing treatment plant. Town meeting last year appropriated \$1 million in design funds, and voters OK’d a real estate transfer tax, the proceeds from which would be earmarked for the plant’s construction and operation. The town also is considering betterment fees as it struggles with an estimated project cost of nearly \$250 million.

Some communities are embroiled in other issues. Take Eastham’s puzzling preoccupation with wind turbine proposals, for example. Land-based wind energy might be worth pursuing on Cape Cod someday, but why is it a priority now, when basic water needs remain unmet?

Provincetown, meanwhile, remains mired in a tedious attempt to sewer Shank Painter Road and enable one Laundromat to operate. This has been going on for years – a testament to the fact that the wheels of environmental strategizing turn slowly on Cape Cod. Treatment facilities aren’t built overnight, and there are opportunities for towns to share facilities and costs, provided they start talking to each other – and hopefully with a sense of urgency.

It is not unreasonable to assume that, as the waters go, so will go the tourism economy that is the backbone of the region.

Nothing, it seems, will affect the quality of life and the economic future of the Lower Cape more than the success or failure of wastewater management – and ultimately, drinking water management.

Orleans and Chatham are on the right track. The other Lower Cape towns need to get with the program.