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No more delays

One by one, Cape towns are getting the jaw-dropping news about the cost of protecting our coastal waterways and ponds and properly treating our wastewater.

Last year, Chatham learned that it will cost at least \$250 million over the next 30 years or so to expand its sewer system, which currently serves only about 300 of the town's 6,000 residences and businesses.

Chatham took the lead among Cape towns more than 10 years ago when it began looking at ways to address the growing problem of excess nitrogen in its estuaries.

In 2004, Chatham was the first town in the state to receive a report on its embayments from the Department of Environmental Protection's Massachusetts Estuaries Project. The project determines how much nitrogen – from such sources as septic systems, fertilizers and wastewater runoff – an embayment can handle.

And the news was not good. Five of Chatham's estuaries – Stage Harbor, Sulphur Springs, Taylors Pond, Bassing Harbor and Muddy Creek – have excess levels of nitrogen.

Likewise, the town of Falmouth is pursuing a comprehensive wastewater and nutrient management planning study for the watersheds of Little Pond, Great Pond, Green Pond, Bournes Pond, Eel Pond and Waquoit Bay.

In November, Falmouth Town Meeting endorsed a townwide wastewater vision and strategies plan, and a nutrient management working group has begun the process of identifying priorities.

In most towns, protecting water quality will not be accomplished with municipal sewers alone. “A combination of bylaw regulatory changes, increased control over the use of lawn fertilizers, improved stormwater drainage systems, wetland restoration, and structural changes to our ponds and inlets will help reduce the scope of municipal sewerage required to restore habitat,” said Carey Murphy, a Falmouth selectman.

In Orleans, a consultant has reported that more than half the town’s developed lots will probably need something besides a septic system to treat their wastewater to protect the town’s bays and ponds.

In the next 20 years or so, 3,300 parcels, or 70 percent of what exists today, must have their wastewater piped off their property and treated at some type of plant, according to Michael Giggey, the consultant. Giggey said Orleans might have to look to other towns for land to build wastewater facilities.

That’s why the work of the Cape Cod Water Protection Collaborative is so important. Formed as a regional entity to coordinate local wastewater treatment efforts, the collaborative can help towns face the financial and environmental challenges.

By now, it should be clear that every Cape town must implement a wastewater management plan, which includes a timetable and financing options. Few seem to realize the urgency of this problem.