

Preserving Cape's land doesn't hurt economy

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I'd like to challenge the assumptions inherent in the Times' questions about whether "the push to preserve open space is hurting our economy" or "driving up real estate prices so middle-income people can't afford to live here."

First of all, the push to preserve open space is largely over. Through the Cape Cod Land Bank, from 1999 to 2005 our towns acquired nearly 5,000 acres at a cost of nearly \$150 million. This tremendous achievement, plus the work that we all did to set aside 15,000 acres at the Massachusetts Military Reservation for watershed protection and wildlife protection, marks the end of major land protection on Cape Cod – partly because the revenue stream to pay for it has now been committed to pay for those past purchases, but mostly because there are so few suitably large and contiguous parcels left to acquire, and their cost has become astronomical.

Did all this land preservation hurt our economy? Not at all. In fact, to the extent

that our economy depends on the Cape's attractiveness to tourists and second homeowners, preserving the open space here greatly helps our economy. It is the sprawl of commercial overdevelopment and spread of pavement and parking areas and the traffic woes they engender that will in the long run hurt our economy, by making our real economic engines - tourism and second homeowners - less likely to want to come to Cape Cod.

And as for the question about whether this open space acquisition is what drives up land prices and prices middle-income people out of the market, I can offer a simple rebuttal: in the many Massachusetts communities where NO open space preservation took place over the last 10 years, home prices rose *as fast or faster* than they did here on the Cape.

Middle-income people can't afford to buy a house here for the same reasons they can't afford to buy practically anywhere else in Massachusetts either. Part of the problem is supply: relatively few housing units have been built in this state in this decade, although Cape Cod towns in fact have led the state in number of residential building permits issued. But the largest factor on Cape Cod, as elsewhere in the state, is that too many higher-income households with two breadwinners having access to plentiful mortgage financing have bid up the price of available housing to unprecedented levels. How much open space a particular town preserved in that time had little or nothing to do with it.

To sum up: most of us, when we bought our first house, asked ourselves, "How are we ever going to afford it?" Looking back, most of us say, "Thank heaven we bought it when we did!" That's how most Cape Codders feel about the open space preservation that took place over the past half dozen years. We saved those thousands of acres for drinking water protection, for wildlife protection, but mainly for preserving the sense of place that all of us on Cape Cod feel. And we are very glad we bought it when we did.

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