

# Experts take narrow look at widespread sewerage

## Chatham may be test case for Cape

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With all Cape towns facing the need to upgrade wastewater treatment to reduce unhealthy nitrogen levels in the region's water resources, the Town of Chatham offered itself as a test case at a conference in Harwich last week.

The challenge facing Chatham:

How to build a town-wide sewer system costing between \$300 million and \$600 million without raising property taxes sky high.

Town Manager William Hinchey told about 110 scientists, engineers and consultants at a conference last Thursday on "Restoring and Protecting Coastal Waters" how Chatham has been planning "fiscal infrastructure" to do this.

"Make it [the project] affordable.

Lord willing, it won't be gathering dust," Hinchey said. "You can implement it and solve the problem."

The conference, geared for specialists working to manage the input of nitrogen into Cape Cod's coastal waters, was co-sponsored by Cape Cod environmental and regulatory groups including the Cape Cod Commission, the Association to Preserve Cape Cod, the Cape Cod Community Foundation, the Cape Cod Water Protection Collaborative and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Held at the Harwich Community Center, the all-day event featured 16 speakers giving talks and joining panel discussions.

“One of the big challenges is to bring the public along with us,” said Maggie Geist, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod. “An ecological disaster will be an economic disaster if we don’t address it.”

Paul Niedzwiecki, chairman of the Cape Cod Water Protection Collaborative and Barnstable’s assistant town manager, agreed. “If we don’t get out in front of this issue and deal with it proactively,” he said, “it’s going to be a lot more expensive and not be on our terms.”

The root of wastewater concerns is the Cape’s growth over the past two decades. All of Cape Cod faces septic system issues and conferees heard a lot about the unhealthy nitrogen levels in Cape Cod’s waters. Nitrogen is found in wastewater effluent and is the primary contaminant from septic systems. When nitrogen contaminates estuaries, it stimulates the growth of algae, which choke off oxygen from aquatic organisms. When nitrogen invades the groundwater system, it enters drinking water supplies.

Wastewater treatment plants can reduce nitrogen in effluents.

In expanding its currently limited sewer system to cover the entire town, Chatham faces its largest capital project ever. In a 20-minute Power Point lecture, Hinchey outlined how Chatham government has planned for this tremendous expense.

Chatham Advises the Experts First off, he advised the scientists to make their science “unassailable.” “Many folks will be hearing about the issue for the first time at the town meeting,” Hinchey said.

Hinchey noted that Chatham is taking a town-wide approach to sewerage, and has drawn on residents from each village to sit on a planning and citizen advisory committee. Meetings are broadcast on local channel 18. Dr. Robert Duncanson, town director of health and environment, works now nearly exclusively on the project. Consultants Stearns and Wheler are also on board.

The key to voters approving a massive project like sewers is convincing them that it is affordable. Hinchey said crucial to this is proving “fiscal credibility.” This involves being up front with taxpayers about future projects.

“In Chatham, we’re able to pretty much die and go to heaven,” Hinchey said with a smile as he referred not only to the town’s

beauty but to the its “idiosyncratic” financial situation, which has resulted in the lowest property tax rate on Cape Cod at \$3.49 per \$1,000. Only 30 percent of the town budget is devoted to funding a small school department, and 60 percent of the property taxes come from second homeowners who do not use the school system.

Taxpayers will not be asked to pay for the entire sewer system through property taxes. Voters at town meeting last May backed a 1 percent real estate transfer tax.

Selectmen have petitioned Beacon Hill for special legislation to allow the surcharge on property sales.

“We feel fairly confident that it might pass,” Hinchey said. “We’re not saying this tax is equitable; we’re saying it causes the project to be affordable. People who are buying or selling a house are relatively more able to afford a 1 percent real estate tax.”

In justifying the tax, he pointed out that a rise in the value of Chatham real estate is not entirely due to the economy – some of it comes from good town services. The project would also be partially financed through user and connector fees.

During a question and answer period, Hinchey was asked why he used the figure of \$600 million for the sewer project.

“I always try to put forth the worst-case scenario,” he said, adding that inflation is built in. The proposal will not come before the town meeting for at least 18 months.

Nate Weeks, a specialist in watershed management with Stearns and Wheler and a consultant to the towns of Chatham and Harwich on wastewater planning projects, spoke about treated wastewater.

Various technologies exist to reintroduce the water into the environment, he said.

Weeks touched upon a proposal to reestablish a dike in Muddy Creek in the area between Chatham and Harwich where nitrogen levels are high. Reestablishing a dike there would convert the upper system, which now has high nitrogen levels, into a freshwater system, which can more easily assimilate nitrogen.

Challenges “would involve converting a salt marsh system to a freshwater one. There are pretty strong regulations that say you can’t do that,” he said. But “I feel encouraged to find a way

through it.” The dike would reduce nitrogen levels even without a sewer being in place.

Acting DEP Commissioner Arleen O’Donnell encouraged participants to “start thinking outside the box” when it comes to dealing with stringent nitrogen limits.