

Pipeline project

A wastewater-funding bill is tailored with Cape Cod in mind.

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The executive director of Barnstable County's new Cape Cod Water Protection Collaborative isn't twiddling his thumbs and waiting for ideas to walk in the door. Andrew Gottlieb has crafted a bill to pipe state wastewater money over the bridge for Cape projects.

That would be fair. While MWRA clients get \$25 million in annual rate relief on their water bills, the Cape over the years has gotten less than 1 percent of state wastewater money.

Senate bill 2379 has been filed by Sen. Rob O'Leary but the details reflect Gottlieb's expertise as a former wastewater manager in the state Department of Environmental Protection. It gets a first hearing at 1 p.m. tomorrow in Room B1 of the Statehouse. If passed, it could jump start the sort of sewerage and treatment projects several Cape towns are contemplating now that the numbers are coming in from the state estuaries project telling how much wastewater flow must be diverted to keep coastal waters from blooming with algae.

The bill does not mention Cape Cod specifically, but it tweaks current state law to address the main challenge of coastal communities: the pernicious flow of nitrogen, which is not removed by today's Title V septic systems.

Broadly, the bill would " earmark " a third of the state's \$60 million annual wastewater revolving fund for projects to reduce nutrients. The state would pay all the interest on construction bonds for selected projects instead of the portion it pays now, making it considerably cheaper for towns.

That's the carrot. The stick is a comprehensive package of land-use and planning rules that would reward towns for "smart growth" zoning. To qualify for the zero-interest bonds, a town would have to present a plan that is "flow neutral," meaning corrections in the project area wouldn't be erased by higher flows from uncontrolled growth elsewhere.

The land-use incentives are the reason O'Leary and Gottlieb hope for Cape support beyond the small cadre of engineers and wastewater wonks.

For instance, proponents of affordable housing will like the greater densities sewerage allows and the provision that specifically allows Chapter 40B-type projects to hook up. But proponents of growth control will find rules they will like, too. It's well known that sewerage attracts growth, because lot size restrictions just for wastewater control can go out the window. But in this incentive program, contrary to current practice, not every Tom, Dick and Harry with a strip mall project will be allowed to jump aboard.

Of course, water treatment is not free. With few exceptions, everyone in one of these designated project districts would be required to hook up and pay betterments, but stretched over 50 years. The state would pay about \$8 million extra each year to cover the zero-interest program.

Taken together, it's an ambitious and comprehensive program that would come at just the right time to serve emerging Cape needs.