

# Charting the course

## Wastewater will shape the next phase of Cape Cod development.

December 20, 2007 6:00 AM

Water traced the course of environmental protection on Cape Cod in 2007. These days have been just the tip of the proverbial iceberg — water will dominate political choices for years to come.

Not drinking water — the Cape's sandy mantle does a good job purifying rainwater that filters down to the aquifer, and surface pollution is largely kept away from well fields. The result is some of the sweetest natural drinking water on the planet.

It's the resulting wastewater that came into focus this year as a political and civic issue. Controlling it and treating it will affect both the aquatic life in our ponds and the look and placement of our building projects.

For instance, Barnstable residents this year got their first look at the data for the Three Bays estuary system on the south side. An estimated 75 percent of the nitrogen that over-fertilizes the shallow bays is arriving underground from septic tanks, which remove most bacteria but not nitrogen. Suddenly residents are throwing around terms like "TMDLs" (total maximum daily load) and applying hydrologic computer models to plot which neighborhoods are contributing the most pollution. To meet federal clean water guidelines, up to 85 percent of the watershed around some of the bays will need sewers.

Six Cape estuaries have their data from the Massachusetts Estuaries Project; 17 others are being sampled and formulated. Chatham has had the longest lead (and has one of the longest shorelines) and has developed a financial plan, spreading the \$300 million anticipated cost over 30 years. Voters there approved the first step, tripling the capacity of the old treatment plant.

And so it seems like perfect timing that Barnstable County's new Cape Cod Water Protection Collaborative hired its first executive director this summer. The aim is to help towns plan and execute projects that span town boundaries, and to be the regional receiver of grants and public funds that require a regional planning perspective. A bill filed by Sen. Robert O'Leary, D-Barnstable, would steer a portion of the state's annual wastewater fund to communities like Cape Cod specifically for abating nutrients like nitrogen.

And as a measure of how interconnected the Cape's environments are, wastewater policies will be felt on land, as well. If planners are successful tweaking town zoning, growth (read "economic development") will be steered to areas where wastewater can be handled safely without exceeding the TMDLs.

One example: This year saw the first payoff of the land-use planning tool called the growth incentive zone in Hyannis, with several blocks redeveloped. The key? Hyannis has sewers. Every town that wants to concentrate growth in tight clusters — and save pond and forest — will now want to consider some sort of enhanced treatment plant.

Water treatment is an investment in the Cape's economic future as well as its natural beauty.