

Losing Cape Cod Forums – A summary of four town forums Held late spring 2012 with Paul Niedzwiecki

League members attended these 4 meetings in Chatham, Orleans, Brewster and Harwich. We have summarized their reports in the following summary.

Questions

1. Time Frame: Is there any realistic possibility that something can be done in 5-10 years on the wastewater problem?

Answer: It is possible for water quality to improve, once a solution is in place, within 5-10 years due to the short time it takes for nitrogen to travel through the groundwater to an estuary in most areas of Cape Cod. Paul does think it might be possible for us to leverage federal dollars if we come together and approach this as a region.

2. Follow up: Even Chatham's plan spreads solution over many years. So in terms of the urgency, where does this leave things?

Answer: We need to get started now and prioritize the subwatersheds that require the most nitrogen removal to meet water quality standards, even though the total solution will take longer.

3. Why is it so hard to get residents to see the need for action?

Answer: When one of Cape Cod's 215,000 year-round residents flushes the toilet, no one can see what happens. It's not like a pot hole in the road. What happens is gradual, but it has been happening for a very long time.

4. Will you give some examples of where the situation is really dire right now?

Answer: Waquoit Bay between Mashpee and Falmouth is very bad. Pomponnessett Bay in Mashpee, Barnstable/Cotuit is bad. The Mashpee River is essentially dead with the exception of some worms. The more estuaries/bays go in land, such as in Barnstable, the worse the problem is. The wastewater situation is becoming increasingly well-known off

cape as well as on—a fact that could impact tourism and home values.

5. What is the situation in Brewster, Bay side?

Answer: The 6-8 foot tide gives the Cape Cod Bay area a good flushing, so that area is not so bad. However, Brewster has a big problem with its ponds with phosphorous.

6. Explain about septic and nitrogen loading.

Answer: Cape-wide, 80% of the nitrogen problem is from wastewater. 85% of nitrogen is discharged in Cape backyards. Septic does very little to remove nitrogen. It removes pathogens. About 5% of the loading comes from fertilizers. Increasing culvert sizes, such as on Rt. 28 and Pleasant Bay, would increase flushing and reduce need for sewage treatment in some areas, where appropriate.

7. In terms of a “Big Pipe”, isn’t this a huge solution for our problem?

Answer: What’s considered a “Big Pipe” here on the Cape would not be considered a big pipe in the Boston metro area. But no one is pushing one solution at this time. A sewage pipe is but one of other options to meet varied needs.

8. What does a “regional approach” mean?

Answer: Regionally we would/could advocate for more resources; we would/could urge better regulations from the state; we would/could also urge for more flexibility in some regulations. If CLF wins, it would most likely lead to federal solutions which tend to be big pipe solutions. Feds could require a higher level of treatment at the existing wastewater treatment facilities. If a facility is treating wastewater with effluent that results in 5 parts per million nitrogen (compared to 26 parts per million which is the concentration from septic) they may be required to treat to a lower level. Treating wastewater to below 5 parts per million requires technology that is very expensive.

9. What creates the cost?

Answer: 70% of the cost is collection and transport. 30% of the cost is what happens at the treatment facility. Facilities need to be built to

handle flow from a population that more than doubles in the summer months.

10. How much of the problem is residential v. commercial property?

Answer: 74% of the residential property on Cape Cod is in a watershed that is potentially nitrogen sensitive. 80% of wastewater is generated from on-site septic systems.

11. Is the Commission advocating one plan over another, for example, a big pipe solution? Answer: Absolutely not! Paul sees a “mosaic” of solutions as the way the Cape should go, a mix of traditional and green infrastructure /alternative approaches across Cape Cod.

12. What about technologies other than large wastewater treatment facilities?

Answer: The Commission plans to offer much information on all technologies, including

the costs, efficiencies, etc. It has been spending the last 6 months on a software application that will allow towns to investigate for themselves. A centralized treatment solution is often the least costly solution; this is particularly true in a densely populated area.

13. What about a “wastewater authority?”

Answer: This was a term used, unfortunately, in the report of the Special Commission. However, neither the Wastewater Collaborative nor the CC Commission of the County has the authority to build anything. All decisions must be made locally in towns. There are economies of scale, however, and there is a greater likelihood of federal revenue if towns band together.

14. What about inter town cooperation? How do towns begin to talk with each other? Answer: Many decisions need to be done on the basis of a watershed area to have the

solution make sense. There are 57 watersheds on the Cape, 32% of them

cross town boundaries. There are various models for inter-town conversations. For example, “Open Table” meetings between/among towns, often lead to “Closed Table” meetings with representatives from the Open Table. This is an approach they are taking in Colorado to manage their river basins-we have been exploring this approach at the Commission.

15. What is the influence of the town meeting form of local government?

Answer: Town Meeting is often viewed as the most democratic form of local government.

However, when attendance at TM is minimal, there can become a tyranny of the minority. In this case, those who fear the high financial costs and loss of local autonomy can dominate the discussion and are under no obligation to deal only with the facts and scientific data. They are reluctant to confront the problem as a whole and the urgent need to address it now. The answer

to this is a better informed town and more persons willing and informed enough to speak in favor of solutions.

16. What can the county do?

Answer: The Cape Cod Commission is developing software to help the towns plan. The software will include the probable costs of various methods of wastewater treatment and information about what conditions make a particular solution workable. The software will also consider any consequences.

The County’s tool will map not only the watersheds and their conditions, but also what happens to them given the application of different kinds of solutions, along with the relative cost of each solution. These possible costs would be a range rather than a specific. The tool would NOT constitute a scientific center for technical assistance. Andrew Gottlieb of the Cape Cod Water Collaborative and Paul are looking at what can be done to push various solutions, realizing that a variety of solutions will be appropriate for different places on the Cape. The Cape Cod Commission has regulatory authority only. All it can do is state whether

or not a plan meets the regs. The County will continue to advocate solutions based on watersheds.

17. What other role can the county play? Can it help secure funding?

Answer: If the region can agree to action regionally, the County may be able to help secure federal and state money to help fund the projects. Paul only sees money coming to “Cape Cod” at this juncture. The goal would be to have 50% funding come from state and federal sources rather than property owners. Our elected officials have to be courageous enough to compete very hard for state and federal money.

18. What are the towns currently doing?

Answer: All the towns are working on wastewater from some and varying aspects. Some towns have plans ranging from those well underway (Chatham) to plans recently defeated at Town Meeting (Yarmouth) to Sandwich, which is just beginning.

19. What about the federal role?

Answer: The Cape is a national treasure – a great asset, similar in many ways to the Chesapeake Bay and the Great Lakes. The Cape also has the National Seashore and Mass Military Preserve. The state and Feds need to see the Cape as a priority; our legislators need to work hard.