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CAPE COD  
COMMISSION

# **Losing Cape Cod**

By PAUL NIEDZWIECKI

As executive director of the Cape Cod Commission, my top priority is keeping this special place special. Today that means finding the least costly solution to our greatest environmental threat. It's that simple.

The threat is a reactive form of nitrogen contained in the wastewater leaving our homes every day. It travels through our backyards, seeping into our watersheds. It is polluting our estuaries and bays, choking them to the point that the marine life, once abundant, is now nonexistent. Many of our estuaries are dead or dying. In many of our bays, shellfish no longer grow naturally and the only living things surviving are a few species of worms, the marine equivalent of cockroaches.

The bill is finally due for decades of unprecedented residential development on our fragile peninsula — at its widest point no more than 10 miles across. It is undeniable that this development has compromised our marine water quality, the defining resource of our region. Forty-six of our watersheds are being studied for nitrogen impairment. These watersheds support 74 percent of residential and 72 percent of commercial parcels on Cape Cod, totaling 183,000 acres. Any Cape Codder who has lived here for more than one generation has witnessed this slow destruction.

For the last decade we have been documenting the deterioration and quietly discussing the problem. The existing regulatory and funding mechanisms encourage a fractured answer to a shared problem. Two-thirds of these watersheds cross town boundaries. The uncoordinated results are predictable: Projects that will be too costly to build and maintain, and unimaginative designs lacking a sustainable connection to the land and marine resources they are intended to protect.

In February, the Special Commission on County Governance, consisting of 27 respected citizens, boldly stepped toward a solution. They recommended a new approach in the form of a regional entity charged to facilitate a better, faster, cheaper solution. The Barnstable County Commissioners, acting on this recommendation, directed the Cape Cod Water Protection Collaborative and the Cape Cod Commission to study and recommend effective options.

By the end of this year, this partnership will produce suggestions for a more efficient solution and a more affordable outcome. These recommendations will promote an innovative and

coordinated plan resulting in the smallest possible concrete footprint, spreading costs equitably, and insisting that our federal and state partners shoulder part of that burden.

I look forward to public input and discussion during this process. The Cape Cod Commission is creating a new software tool designed to support this community engagement, not to shape any particular outcome. I understand that an incredible diversity of opinion exists, but certain facts remain immutable and every option should be available for taxpayer consideration.

Change is difficult. Our hesitancy as a community is both understandable and inexcusable. As one community we have arrived at the crossroads of our environment and our economy. The cost of doing nothing is economically devastating to every homeowner on the Cape. The result of a court-ordered cleanup could cause an economic dislocation that would tear the fabric of this community permanently. The window is closing on our opportunity to solve this problem on our terms, sensitive to the concerns of the individual villages that populate this peninsula.

We can fix this. Our formerly pristine environment, ruined over the course of one generation, can be restored over the course of the next. We can make it affordable, and at the same time we can improve our economy and our quality of life. But we can do it only if we stand together and act as one community, one Cape.

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