

The Barnstable Patriot

Clean Water is a Fundamental Right of Citizenship

November 11, 2016

By: Michael J. Egan

Access to clean water is a fundamental right of every citizen in the Town of Barnstable. After public safety and security, it's the second most important municipal service we as residents provide to ourselves. And our water, that one resource aside from air that we need to live, is in tough shape.

Sure, clean water falls from the sky, but we get ours from pumping it out of the ground. The same ground into which we flush every toilet, empty every sink, and drain every road. Water in the ground flows downhill just like on the surface. This means you drink, wash, cook, swim and fish with whatever your neighbor uphill from you puts into the ground.

Our system of using ground water as both a source of public water supply and a private dumping ground for wastewater is not sustainable.

The problems this closed loop system causes are many. Look no further than the estuary-wide algae bloom in early August. The bloom, a result of excess nitrogen from septic systems, caused a fish kill in North Bay from lack of oxygen. The lack of oxygen also threatened the oyster beds all over the Three Bays estuary. The entire shellfish industry is now closed all over the South Cape. The Wellfleet Oyster Festival was canceled because of concerns of contaminated oysters. This past May Town officials recommended that pregnant women, infants and nursing mothers in Hyannis not drink Town water because thresholds for two contaminants exceeded updated levels set by the EPA. Expensive new Town wells will have to be found, drilled and connected because we flush where we drink.

How do we enforce our rights to Clean Water? The answer is understanding that we don't have a Clean Water problem. We have a Wastewater Management problem. Ask, demand, insist, or protest if you have to—that our community and Town Councilors implement a Wastewater management plan that keeps our groundwater and drinking water clean and our wastewater kept separated.

Three Bays Preservation Inc. has had our eyes on this issue for nearly 20 years. We recognize the problem is 100 years in the making, mostly due to the increase in population. We know we can't solve this crisis overnight but we have studied this issue to death. We know how to fix it. The list of technologies, systems and processes are well known. We just need the political will. The removal of nitrogen and other contaminants isn't as hard or as expensive as people fear. There will be a cost but the old saying of 'an ounce of prevention beats a pound of cure' applies here. The nitrogen and contaminant crisis isn't limited to Barnstable nor the Cape itself. It's a coastal problem wherever humans and toilets share the same resource.

Freedom demands civic participation. Results can come through a chorus of collective voices calling, writing and talking to Town officials demanding their rights to Clean Water.

Clean Water will come when we implement a Wastewater Management plan. This is a right a community gives to itself. Let's work together to solve this environmental injustice. Let's continue this conversation. Please join me on Thursday, November 10 at 5 p.m. at the Osterville Village Library for my talk, *Endangered: The Nitrogen Crisis in Our Shared Ecosystem*, as part of Sea the Vision, a lecture series sponsored by Three Bays.

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Michael J. Egan is President of the Board of Directors at Three Bays Preservation Inc., an organization that advocates for clean water in West, North and Cotuit Bays, and the coves, ponds, rivers and streams that form our watershed and ecosystems. Learn more at www.3bays.org.

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