



Opinion

Relocate Cape Cod Hospital, halt risky expansion

By Zenas Crocker

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Cape Cod Healthcare (CCHC) is in the final stages of planning a hospital campus expansion that brings important community assets closer to Hyannis Harbor and our rising seas. The sensible and vital, longer-term vision should be to relocate the entire hospital campus away from the waterfront to the existing CCHC 40-acre expansion site in Independence Park in Hyannis.

The latest information on sea-level rise comes from the dozens of sentinel stations located along the coastline of the United States. The message is clear and alarming: sea-level rise is accelerating. It really doesn't matter what is causing the seas to rise for the purposes of this discussion; the question is how do we ensure the protection and functionality of Cape Cod's most important community asset?

Recent Federal Emergency Management Agency flood maps put the current hospital campus barely out of the danger zone. The proposed new building is only a few feet away from the current 12-foot surge area. Have we already forgotten or are we choosing to ignore the lessons of Hurricane Sandy? Storm surges are unpredictable and, with rising sea levels, a margin of just a few feet represents a startling lack of forethought. In a time of acute crisis, the hospital needs to be accessible, open and fully functional.

The commonwealth of Massachusetts has recently launched a comprehensive Municipal Vulnerability Program to help communities with the challenge of sea-level rise. The Cape Cod Commission has received grant funding from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and others to examine the challenges of rising seas with an eye toward developing options to cope with the inevitable changes our fragile peninsula will face. It appears to be paradoxical to accept a grant to examine these challenges while reviewing a project of this magnitude in this precarious location at the same time.

Here at the Barnstable Clean Water Coalition, we have published a book examining relatively current modeling on sea-level rise with suggested options on how we can cope. In association with the University of Massachusetts Amherst School of Landscape Architecture, this study looks at options ranging from armoring to retreat. No doubt, we face many different choices, but in our wildest dreams we never expected to see a proposal for the expansion of the hospital even closer to Cape Cod's ever-sinking coastline.

Community leadership, the state and our citizens should insist that we move the entire hospital campus inland and adjacent to the Mid-Cape Highway. Yes, this area is a groundwater protection zone, but proper planning can accommodate that. A new highway exit should be designed, so that emergency vehicles have adequate and rapid access to this critical community resource. Now is the time to start planning for these changes. We really don't have the luxury of delay, since such a major shift would require decades and millions of dollars.

I am currently enrolled in the town of Barnstable's Citizen Leadership Academy and I recently met with members of the Emergency Medical Team and I asked them their thoughts regarding the current planning for the hospital's expansion. "It's an 'MCI'," they said.

"What's that?", I asked.

"Mass Causality Incident." When and if the generators go out, the entire hospital will need to be evacuated ... off Cape! If we have any doubts that this could happen here on Cape Cod, all we have to do is look at the experiences of other coastal communities.

Another recent "My View" column noted a host of additional reasons to reconsider this expansion, from traffic to taxes. Why not examine the longer-term opportunity to repurpose the existing hospital campus? Perhaps a residential redevelopment designed to help our housing shortage? The right designs could easily accommodate the rising sea. Such an effort could help revitalize the East End of Hyannis. Planners could reconfigure the Lewis Bay coastline to accommodate and protect this area. Cape Cod Hospital would be where it belongs: elevated, protected and ready to serve all of Cape Cod!

Zenas Crocker is executive director of the Barnstable Clean Water Coalition, Three Bays Preservation.

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