

The Barnstable Patriot

Three Bays Preservation: Wastewater is everybody's problem

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By Michael J. Egan

Everyone in Barnstable should be worried about a polluted ecosystem, every teenager, adult and senior citizen - but once they are, what can be done? That's what I've been thinking whenever the concern about the nitrogen crisis in the Three Bays Estuary enters my mind. My worry is, unfortunately, a constant companion.

Cotuit, North and West Bays are ill in an ecological sense. Every day, nitrogen from overloaded septic systems is deposited into the Three Bays estuary, equal to sixty-five 50-pound bags of fertilizer. Over the course of a year, that's 23,530 bags weighing 50 pounds apiece in the water where you fish, swim, kayak, paddleboard, sail and boat. This means the very waters that look blue and clean and inviting, really aren't. Let's not forget that the water is still polluted, and this is a year-round problem. The fact that summer is behind us doesn't mean the problem has gone away.

Remember, in August we had a fish kill in North Bay most likely caused by the Rust Tide algae bloom that wove itself through the 1,251-acre estuary. Remember the warning to pregnant women not to drink the water in Hyannis? It's not a clean water problem. It's a wastewater problem. Our drinking water wells and estuaries are contaminated because we flush where we drink and swim. We shouldn't need these reminders to activate within ourselves the duties of being a citizen.

Everybody should be talking about the wastewater management problem when they are out and about anywhere in Barnstable. This should be a conversation everyone should be having with family, friends and neighbors. But once a citizen gets it, what's next? What are the answers for concerned citizens in an enlightened, informed and effective electorate? I have the answer: your pen.

Write to members of the Barnstable Town Council. That's the governing body presiding over local affairs.

Let them know that you as a taxpayer in the town of Barnstable expect a solution to our wastewater problem. Asking "Where's my 'fair share' of clean water and wastewater management" might just be a good way to start. Installing sewers and other technologies where appropriate in parts of the town of Barnstable is a way to begin tackling clean water and wastewater issues. Monies exist. The Sewer and Private Road Fund has a balance of \$11,536,000 and grows at over \$2.4 million dollars a year. A comprehensive waste resource solution may require additional revenues, but considering that our water bills are some of the lowest in the state and we can't continually relocate our drinking water wells, I know we can afford it. I certainly know we can't afford not to fix it.

This natural resource emergency belongs to us all, and so does a potential solution. The phrase, "We the People" doesn't just resound at the federal level. Write to the town council today, and tell them that you as a citizen have a right to clean water and a clean environment.

Here's their address:

Town Councilors

Town Manager, Town of Barnstable

367 Main St.
Hyannis, MA 02601

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Michael J. Egan is President of the Board of Directors of Three Bays Preservation Inc., an organization established in 1996 to advocate for the restoration and protection of West, North and Cotuit Bays, and the coves, ponds, rivers and streams that form our watershed and estuary. Learn more at www.3bays.org.

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