

More questions crop up about wastewater

By Doreen Leggett

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ORLEANS - The questions were broad, easily grasped and would either help dispel or intensify questions about the town's \$150 million path to cleaner waters.

They were good questions, but weren't answered for good reason. They were outside the purview of the town's consultant, the Woods Hole Group, which addressed technical questions.

Still, at Wednesday's board of selectmen's meeting, there was public outcry from respected quarters, such as Len Short from the Orleans Pond Coalition.

Selectman Sims McGrath Jr. who has spent years dealing with wastewater issues on various town boards, understood. "A lot of people felt they were intriguing questions and wanted them to be answered (but) it wasn't the right forum," he said.

To allay concerns, the questions have all been read into the record and have been submitted to the Woods Hole Group and, selectmen said, may be answered in the consultant's final report.

If they aren't, and the board decides they need to be, selectmen will find the answers, said Selectman David Dunford.

The questions included:

- What would be the cost benefit to pursue further studies?
- Is the (Massachusetts Estuaries Project) a reasonable basis for wastewater plan?
- Are any further studies critical to accomplish before proceeding with the town plan and if so, how long would they take to do and at what cost?
- Despite limitations identified, is there sufficient evidence to support Orleans implementing the initial phases of the comprehensive wastewater management plan?

The questions resonated because they got to the heart of a debate in town. The Wastewater Management Validation and Review Committee had been chosen by selectmen to pore over reports by the Massachusetts Estuary Project, a joint initiative between the state Department of Environmental Protection and the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Information from the project forms the basis for not only Orleans' plans to address the problem of excess nitrogen from septic systems choking the bays and estuaries but the whole Cape's.

The committee is working with the Woods Hole Group to take a closer look at the state's Pleasant Bay report, which detailed amounts of nitrogen that needed to be removed to bring healthy waters back. Both the committee and the consultant's draft report found "uncertainties."

One of the issues is that the consultant found that nitrogen levels are decreasing across the entire Pleasant Bay system, and in some areas even meet the levels the state has set. If that's true, the sewerage and other treatment methods planned for areas of town could be downsized.

That's why so many questions have been generated about whether town officials were comfortable enough to embark on such an ambitious plan with these concerns floating around.

The overall consensus has been that the peer review didn't call into question the main tenets of the plan that has been 10 years in the making.

The selectmen want the validation committee to remain involved as the town's plan gives it flexibility to change course to address new information.

The town is now looking forward to getting the last of three reports, one dealing with the Nauset Estuary, from the state. It's been delayed for close to five years for various reasons, including a proprietary disagreement between UMass and the state DEP.