



ENVIRONMENTAL LOOKOUT: PLEASE HELP MASHPEE'S WATERS!

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Many Mashpee residents were dismayed after reading the January 1, 2023 *NY Times* article that described our waters – to readers far and wide – as a “toxic stew.” Yet all who live or vacation here have seen firsthand that our waterways have been steadily declining for decades.

The sad state of our waters has surely not happened overnight. While overdevelopment is the primary cause, contributing factors include the liberal use of fertilizers and pesticides, slowness of town officials to enact recommended solutions (particularly sewerage and stormwater improvements), an antiquated State Title V program, and the burning desire of people to build and live right at the water’s edge.

Whether reading the 2010 Santuit Pond AECOM Report or viewing recent presentations by consultants Fuss and O’Neill, it is clear that our waters reached their current state due to many factors, after decades of denial – and therefore many different approaches will be needed to help them start their long healing process. Moreover, as the late Brian Howes rightly warned us on numerous occasions, the longer we wait to start these remedies, the worse our waters will become -- not to mention the cost of needed solutions will continue to rise due to inflation.

Some residents and board members are fond of proclaiming that the upcoming sewer project will solve all our water woes. However, though implementing the science-based 2015 plan for sewers and shellfish propagation would help clean our estuaries as intended, different measures are required to help our ponds that are mainly challenged by excess phosphorus.

Thankfully, the Town has recently moved forward with proposals to start healing our waters, beyond sewerage, via three “Clean Water” Articles that are on the May 1st Town Meeting Warrant:

Article 27 would reduce the speed of motorboats on Santuit Pond and set a horsepower limit of 10HP. Given the pond’s shallowness and amount of phosphorus-rich sediment at its bottom, these changes would decrease the amount of resuspended phosphorus resulting from boating activities – and less phosphorus means fewer algae blooms. While some feel these restrictions are not enough, this compromise measure would allow fishermen and boat owners to still enjoy Santuit Pond while helping to protect it.

Articles 36 and 37 would increase the wetlands buffer zone that is under the jurisdiction of the Conservation Commission from 100' to 150', and the naturally vegetated buffer strip from 50' to 75'. Given the Cape's sandy soil, and the fact that our current buffers are obviously not enough to protect our waters, this increase is an important step in the healing process. As rivers already have a mandated 200' buffer, this compromise measure for our ponds and wetlands would provide them with increased protection.

Regarding the proposed buffer changes, some claim that they will do nothing to "clean" our waters, yet that is not what experts say. Their importance is clearly explained in excerpts from the *Massachusetts Vegetated Buffer Manual*, available at www.mass.gov:

"Simply put, a vegetated buffer is a protective area between a waterbody and human activity, such as development. . . . They are "living filters," because they capture many of the pollutants that travel through them. Buffers filter out sediment and debris from surface runoff. Plant root systems and chemical and biological activity in the soil can capture and transform nutrients and other pollutants and transform them into less harmful forms. . . . Pollutants carried by runoff that cause the most concern in lakes and streams are sediment, nutrients, and pathogens, all three of which can be largely captured in vegetated buffers."

Although existing structures would be grandfathered regarding the buffer changes, opponents express concern for property owners who have not yet built on their land. Yet town officials have already vowed to meet with the small number of residents in this category to help them find workable solutions.

Still others argue, "What about the property value of those landowners who have not yet built?" To that we should all reply, "What will happen to the property values of all Mashpee residents if our waters continue down their current 'toxic stew' path?" Healthy ponds, estuaries, and beaches benefit us all. Isn't it time the good of the many outweighs the good of the few?

Mashpee prides itself on being a "green community." Yet do we really want "algae green" to continue as the color of our ponds and beaches? Our consultants and town officials are recommending these common sense, no-cost-to-taxpayer changes as important steps toward cleaner waters – now – steps that cannot begin unless Mashpee voters agree. I hope you will join me in helping our town and our waterways by attending the May 1st Town Meeting – and voting "Yes."

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