



Op-Ed: Upper Bay Regional Wastewater Project Would Bring Profound Water Quality Benefits

By MARK RASMUSSEN Feb 26, 2021 0

[Home](#) / [Bourne](#) / [Bourne Opinion](#)

The Buzzards Bay Coalition was founded in 1987 by citizens coming together in anger at sewage and toxic pollution, at the frequency of oil spills, and the increasing loss of clean, abundant shellfish in every bay community.

Since then we've made big progress on many of those founding concerns. We've seen the cleanup of New Bedford's sewage and the toxic groundwater at Otis. We've secured the strongest protections from barge-related oil spills in the country, and we've worked with towns to cut the acres of shellfish beds closed due to pollution in half.

I start with that brief history to put my next statement in context:

The Buzzards Bay Coalition has never seen a project with greater potential to reduce pollution and clean up water quality in the entire Upper Bay region—from Wings Neck in Bourne to Pease Point in Mattapoisett—than the Upper Bay Regional Wastewater Project. The huge environmental benefits it offers deserve the most thoughtful and deliberate consideration of everyone who lives in Bourne, Wareham and Marion.

The impact is big, but the concept is relatively simple: Collect all of the poorly treated waste from homes and businesses in the towns of Marion, Wareham, mainland Bourne and south Plymouth; treat it to the highest standards at the Wareham Wastewater Treatment Plant; and then discharge the cleaned water at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy's existing canal outfall.

Recent news articles and comments from some residents reveal that there are some serious misconceptions about the project that need to be addressed.

The Pollution Reductions Are Large

This project would reduce pollution—dramatically—to the Upper Bay. Right now, inadequately treated waste from older wastewater systems and from the thousands of septic systems in the area all currently discharge high levels of nitrogen pollution to our waters, and they release it at the most sensitive parts of the bay where groundwater and streams enter estuaries such as Buttermilk Bay. Residential septic systems—even new Title V-compliant systems—are not designed to remove nitrogen pollution, which flow to the bay in groundwater where it causes the poor water clarity, fish and shellfish suffocating from low oxygen, and algae blooms that are destroying our coastal waters. By treating all of these currently untreated homes and facilities at the Wareham Wastewater Treatment Plant (which consistently achieves nitrogen pollution removal rates of greater than 95 percent), the Upper Bay project results in much less pollution into our waters, making the restoration of harbors and coves in all three towns possible.

The Canal Is The Best Discharge Location

A canal discharge location is far better than any alternatives. By utilizing Mass Maritime's existing outfall into the end of the Cape Cod Canal, the discharge of this highly treated water gets the added benefit of the massive volumes, back-and-forth flow, speedy current and rich oxygen environment to dilute the effluent to where it will create no negative impact on the surrounding area. This has been confirmed by top scientists at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Some have suggested that a discharge down into Buzzards Bay might be better, but it would be worse—losing all of the built-in benefits that the canal flushing provides.

The Science Foundation Is Solid

The Upper Bay Project seeks to treat all of the existing nitrogen-polluted septic system waste in these towns to the highest standards, and it then discharges it to the best location possible at the canal. The

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result is the removal of large loads of existing nitrogen pollution and excellent treatment for any future growth.

To reject a canal outfall location for the discharge of this highly treated water out-of-hand is to accept that it is better to continue to pollute shallow, much more environmentally sensitive places such as Buttermilk Bay with untreated septic system discharges.

We believe that a solid scientific foundation underlies the Upper Bay Project, but we encourage everyone not to just take our word for it. The Town of Bourne has full access to the Woods Hole scientists who have studied the project to date, and we very much look forward to working with the town's own consultants at Environmental Partners as they evaluate the proposal.

Born From Community Need

The Upper Bay Project was born out of the common challenges facing each of the partner communities and Mass Maritime. Each are struggling with degraded waters and all need additional treatment capacity to provide treatment to more homes and businesses in their town. Towns asked the Coalition to help coordinate and secure grant funds to develop the idea. It has not been difficult to do so with nearly \$800,000 in design funds contributed by the US Environmental Protection Agency to date. Big ideas have the potential to attract big dollars, and this is something all towns desperately need. Both the EPA and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection have made their enthusiasm for the evaluation of the project very clear as a way to solve the serious wastewater challenges each town is facing.

The Bottom Line

This Upper Bay regional solution is a big, complicated, multi-town project. Every community involved and Mass Maritime need to consider the benefits of joining together against the alternative of "going it alone." There is no "do nothing" option available unless we are all willing to watch the continuing degradation of our coastal waters. In the end, I expect that the decision to move forward together or not will be based largely on local financial and governance considerations. We will do our best to assist communities with the information they need to evaluate these questions, but these issues are not our core expertise; the bay is.

The Buzzards Bay Coalition got involved in the Upper Bay project because the outcome it would produce is by far the best environmental outcome for our bay for decades to come. We are confident that anyone who takes the time to evaluate the science will come to the same conclusion.

Mark Rasmussen has served as president of the Buzzards Bay Coalition since 1998.

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