

village view

by Andrea Leonard

With the expansion of its sewer system, the Town of Barnstable is experiencing some Big City problems. Acres of woodland on the north side of Hyannis were cleared last spring for the additional filter beds; all summer long parts of Barnstable Village have been torn up to enable crews to lay the sewer pipes; and now there's legal action by a contractor who bid on but didn't get the job.

The grains of sand, it's alleged, being carted in for the filter beds aren't the proper size to provide adequate drainage; the result, it's warned, will be a shorter life for the filter beds. Shorter by 50% to 60%, according to the contractor who lost out.

Apparently Whitman & Howard, the engineering firm that drew up the specifications, takes the position it won't matter that much, and as a result of that, the Town is contemplating legal action against Whitman and Howard on the grounds the specifications were more stringent than necessary, making costs of the system higher than they might have been.

The need to sewer Barnstable Village and environs has already been established and is not disputed here. Barnstable's north shore doesn't enjoy the natural filtering soils found on the south side of town; instead the ground is layered with clay deposits, impermeable striations over which untreated discharges from homes and businesses run freely into the harbor, the waters of Cape Cod Bay, and, at least to some extent, the water table.

Many homeowners on the north side have encountered serious cesspool problems for years. Nature's methods of filtering and cleaning what's dumped down the drain is inadequate in that part of town. Too many drains, flushes, washing machines and dishwashers are the real problem; too many people for the land to support is the problem behind it all.

Homeowners on most of the south side still depend on cesspools and septic tanks, and because the soil is sandy, it provides a natural filter bed. The individual systems seem to work well with a minimum of problems. Although all private property in the town is taxed to help pay for sewerage the north side, property owners on the south side don't expect to pay additional taxes to sewer our part of town nor to be assessed for hook-up fees -- at least for a long time to come.

Is our self-satisfaction justified? We can look to some neighbors on Long Island's South Shore for possible answers and comparisons. The southwestern portion of Suffolk County lies hardly more than 100 miles to the west of us as the crow flies. There, too, the soil is sandy and provides a natural filter for sewer wastes.

The unprecedented increase in population of Suffolk County, however, resulted a decade ago in the decision to sewer the suburban townships of Babylon and Islip, a 57-square-mile district with 80,000 homes. One of the largest public works projects in the country, the system when first conceived was expected to cost \$291 million; current estimates are up to \$573 million, and there's general agreement, after calculating interest costs and related expenses, the system will eventually come in at over a billion.

According to the New York Times, experts are raising questions about the effect of the project on the island's fragile ecological system and asking whether, in the long run, the sewers will adversely affect the area's already tenuous ground water supply. Drinking water.

Further questions about alternatives available to growing communities are also asked- in what other ways might these growth-related problems of waste disposal and water pollution be solved?

Sewers in suburbia are a relatively new development. The traditional system is the cesspool, a concrete-lined hole in the back yard into which wastes flow. There, through natural processes of decomposition and drainage, wastes are dispersed harmlessly into the ground.

ient here are septic tanks used in areas where immediate discharge of wastes, as through cesspools, threatens to pollute ground water. These tanks store wastes until they overflow to a leaching field and are dispersed slowly. During the storage and seepage stages, decomposition occurs naturally.

The Town of Barnstable building code now requires all new housing be equipped with both a septic tank and a cesspool unless the disposal system is connected with the municipal sewer.

An advantage of a sewer is its finality. It doesn't overflow, clog, need occasional pumping, or require replacement. Wastes can be chemically treated, if necessary, before they reach water supplies to render them less contaminating.

Nine years ago when Suffolk County's Southwest Sewer District was approved, it was viewed as a showcase project. Since 1976, however, allegations have been made of fraud and corruption involving contracts for the sewer project. Sound familiar?

Recent developments are even more ominous. Homeowners in the district are being billed for the project even though they have not yet been hooked up to the system. Accordingly, prices of real estate have plummeted as hundreds of houses have come on the market. Some homeowners are facing annual property taxes of \$5,000.

Suffolk County executives admit the county had pledged assessments wouldn't be made until the system was operating, but now argue that "totally unforeseeable circumstances (including the New York City fiscal crisis which made it difficult for Suffolk to sell its sewer district bonds) necessitate the tax bills.

There may be lessons to be learned from Suffolk County's experience with the Southwest Sewer District. It may be urban development in suburban areas should never be allowed without properly assessing the environmental damage to follow. If this had been done before Suffolk's population became impacted, remedial action of a sewer system wouldn't have been necessary on Long Island's sandy South Shore.

The Executive Director of the Nassau-Suffolk Regional Planning Board believes only a portion of the district actually needed sewerage; given the island's natural contours and sand filtration system, continued use of septic tanks and cesspools would have served most of the area adequately.

In recent months the Regional Planning Board has studied (under a \$5.2 million federal program) Long Island's environment to ensure the strict federal standards for drinking and swimming waters could be met by 1984. The study concludes that it's simplistic to believe pollution and waste problems of suburban communities can be solved only through sewer systems.

Alternatives include better street sweeping techniques, better control of animal wastes, banning nitrogenous fertilizers and improving lawn fertilizers.

Another alternative worthy of attention is a solution used widely in Scandinavia and promoted in this country by Abby Rockefeller: the Clivus Multrum, a waterless waste treatment system for homes. Toilet wastes and garbage are converted to organic fertilizer inside a large fiberglass tank in the basement, without water, without chemicals and without heat.

Natural composting does it, providing an endproduct, clean and odorless, you can safely use in your flowerbeds and vegetable gardens.

For more information about this alternative, write Clivus Multrum, 14A Eliot Street, Cambridge, MA 02138.

Maybe we can learn a lesson from Long Island neighbors and save ourselves lots of trouble, heartache, taxes, legal fees, water, and additional sewerage of the Town of Barnstable.