

VILLAGE VIEW

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It's almost like Christmas Day. We know it's coming, we know it will get here if we but wait patiently, and along about the last week in July, we begin the count-down. Six, five, three more weeks, ten days, and as I write, five; when you read this, it will have come and gone. Labor Day.

Last week, at the local supermarket, five of us, all had grown up in the village, found ourselves in a cluster. We stood there, leaning on our shopping carts for a few minutes, laughing together and saying, "Why, it's almost as though it's after Labor Day."

This end-of-summer feeling, like the tourists, overwhelm us because recent decades have brought more people to the Cape each year; we're surfeited with them.

Time was, we longed for the short two-month summer season to open; we responded to every summer visitor's idle whim; we hated to see the daily calendar pages fall and bring Labor Day inexorably closer. We were dependent, economically, on the business generated during those nine or ten weeks between the 4th of July and the first Monday in September. While to some extent we still are, most of the money that changes hands from tourists to Cape businesses now finds its way off-Cape almost as quickly as it's spent.

By numerical comparison, few local shops are indigenous; most are headquartered elsewhere. The small businessman, competing with branches of large department stores or chains, takes home an ever-dwindling seasonal profit from his shop or store; he now depends more on his year-round customers for his living than on the summer people. Without the loyal support of his neighbors, he'd have closed, long since.

Now it's a matter of suffering through the tourist season and enduring it until the summer crowds disperse. After Labor Day, to be sure, come the off-season visitors. In fact, the season on the Cape has stretched to a point that it's no longer unusual to see out-of-state license plates except during deep winter months, and off-Capers from nearby come down on weekends all year. They're welcome, too, for they contribute to balance in the Cape's economy.

It's July and August visitors who invade, their very numbers making us wonder if it wouldn't be a good move to blow up the bridges and who leave us feeling relief when Labor Day finally dawns.

Now we'll be able to stop at the post office without circling the village four or five times; now we can return library books without hiking half-a-mile; now we can do our banking, fill a prescription or pick up bread and milk without wondering if we should make an appointment in advance.

What troubles us who call Cape Cod home is the sensation that proprietorship of our own small villages is being wrested from us. In summer our town ceases to be our own and becomes, it seems, the property of half the people on the Eastern Seaboard and environs. We lose our identity in ways never experienced by our visitors in their own home communities (unless, of course, they winter in such resort areas as Florida's coastal communities).

At this time there's considerable controversy about the management of Sandy Neck, for example. Who is to have responsibility for its administration? Although much of it was purchased as conservation land, recreation buffs are enthusiastic about extending privileges of access to more and more

of the fragile environment it offers. Conservationists and ecologists violently oppose granting more space at Sandy Neck to public use. Because it's unique and because its character can be irreversibly destroyed if opened to a thoughtless and uncaring public, protecting its untouched areas is important to many of us.

And because the general public, including some of us who live here, demonstrates it is thoughtless and uncaring, environmentalists hope to protect Sandy Neck from desecration. Perhaps a constructive move would be a public education program; perhaps every vehicle passing through the gates to the Neck should receive a printed leaflet detailing the concerns some of us have for it, and asking public cooperation to reduce littering, explaining the delicacy of the area, and urging everyone using the Neck for recreation purposes to treat it with the respect it deserves.

Would that help? It might, in national parks there are headquarters buildings where graphic displays teach appreciation of the area. Certain parts are open to the public; others are closed. But visitors are told why and instructed regarding acceptable behavior. At parklands, both state and national, a more caring behavior is seen than is found at public recreation areas operated and administered by towns on the Cape. Do educational pamphlets make the difference?

Resistance to acquiring more public beaches, more small boat launching ramps, more conservation land that may become campgrounds (that will be predictably defiled with trash, litter and garbage of the careless or, perhaps, simply uneducated users) is being felt at Town Offices and town meetings, Cape-wide. Perhaps an effort to inform visitors would make their presence less disturbing. If it works at state and national parks, and it seems to, why wouldn't it work locally?

Certainly it would be an added expense; printing pamphlets isn't cheap, these days. Neither, on the other hand, are clean-up crews, vandalism repairs and the additional personnel for policing public areas. It's something the Sandy Neck Advisory Committee may wish to consider, if, of course, the group receives Town Meeting approval.

But the issue of Sandy Neck is but one concern residents of Barnstable now are increasingly aware of when encountering day-to-day problems of ever growing populations of summer visitors as well as the steadily swelling number of year-rounders. There's growing awareness of threatened water shortages, of danger fresh water supplies are being contaminated, of landfill disposal areas running out of space, of parking problems and traffic congestion in small villages, of too heavy a traffic-load on Route 28, and of over-crowded beaches on pleasant summer days.

When all the discussions are over and done with, when all the plans are made and put into practice, when every detail has been thought through and implemented, some facts will remain the same.

No matter how restrictive we make access to Sandy Neck, it takes but a few people to despoil it. No matter how many parking spaces we provide for automobiles, there'll never be enough to accommodate all that come in summer months. No matter how large the lake, it can be drained with a pipe of sufficient diameter. No matter what size the disposal area, it will eventually reach capacity and alternate solutions to waste-generation must be found. No matter what steps are taken to protect our water supplies and quality, if the numbers of people continue to grow, we'll all end up buying bottled water to cook with and to drink. No matter how wide Route 28 becomes, the road, like our villages, has its limits.

And finally, no matter how much money tourists bring to the economy of Cape Cod during July and August, Cape Codders will spend those months counting weeks and days 'til Labor Day.