



Talk

Viewpoints

Cape Cod Times Viewpoint Columns by Chuck Carey

Building Boom

Read the whole thing before you call me. My phone number is in the book.

Years ago, a group of preservation-minded Cape Codders took it upon themselves to sponsor the formation of a county-level planning and regulatory agency. It evolved into the Cape Cod Commission.

The noble aim of the Commission and its supporters was to maintain the rural quality of the Cape and not let it devalue itself by over-intense development. Designed to cover new subdivisions of residential land and commercial development only, residential construction on existing, subdivided lots was not placed under its jurisdiction. A fatal flaw. That means that all those plans for all those lots that were filed on paper years ago are still legal to build on. And they are being built on rapidly.

The net effect of the Commission so far has been to scare away a few large commercial enterprises. This did nothing to reduce the traffic flow on the Cape but it made everyone feel as though something was being done to address the problem. Now here's the point - Commercial Plazas and business centers are routinely shackled with expensive traffic mitigation, and an array of other costly tributes to satisfy the regulations. But are these plazas the cause of the traffic? Do they actually create traffic or do they simply attract it?

Now that the market is active again, it's become sorely apparent that the major source of over-development and traffic, on the Cape is residential, not commercial, construction. More homes make more traffic. More homes make less woodland habitats. More homes burden municipal resources of all kinds.

Unfortunately, the Commission is unable to regulate the ongoing rush to build homes on these lots.

The Land Bank, a sort of aftermarket response to the building boom, is designed to produce a feeble \$4 M to \$5 M per year to buy land across the 15 towns of Cape Cod. That may sound like a lot of dough until you know that the Barnstable County Registry of Deeds handles roughly \$900,000,000 in transfers in a normal year. Does that give you a better idea of the scale we are dealing with?

The Land Bank is a squirt gun aimed at a tank. It can't possibly have enough of an impact quick enough to stop the onslaught of new residential construction. Do the math. It works out to about 8 or 10 lots in each town per year.

It was quite a notable achievement for the preservationist community to have launched the Cape Cod Commission and the Land Bank. Again, the magnitude of the present building boom was unforeseen when both of those were created. Given their success, it seems likely that they same people would be able to generate something that actually addresses the problem.

Certain types of building has been banned outright in some towns. Moratoriums have been placed in other towns. Restrictions on new residential construction could be placed.

As Abe Lincoln said, you can't help the wage-earner by burdening the wage-payer. You can't help the poor by encumbering the rich. Perhaps if he had lived in Hyannis he would have said that you can't reduce the traffic on the Cape by hindering the commercial properties.

We need to treat the disease, not the symptom.