

ESSAY

CAPE MUST UNIFY TO HAVE POLITICAL CLOUT IN BOSTON

BY THOMAS P. O'NEILL III

More than just a geographic region of Massachusetts, Cape Cod also is an economic resource for the entire state, and it needs to be treated as such if it is going to continue to help drive statewide growth and prosperity.

On both Beacon Hill and Capitol Hill there needs to be a greater recognition that what hurts the Cape hurts the state, and what aids Cape business helps boost statewide coffers. In other words: What is good for Cape Cod is good for Massachusetts.

Cape Cod is second only to Boston in representing the image and substance of Massachusetts to outsiders. The Cape is an economic engine when it comes to this state's largest business – tourism – and brings in one-quarter of the dollars in that sector. That takes a back seat only to Boston, and far outstrips the state's other regions.

While tourism is an integral component of the Cape's economic engine, it is its people and their power to affect state and federal policy that is paramount to securing the region's future.

We hear repeatedly that we need to protect Cape Cod – to guard it from over-development, from pollution, from unwise infrastructure construction. Absolutely. But there needs to be a pragmatic understanding that protecting the Cape does more than keep pristine beaches beautiful; it also helps protect our state's economic health. Consider:

- Since 1990, Cape Cod and the Islands has been the fastest-growing region in Massachusetts, as measured by population, workforce and total employment.
- Since 1990, personal income for the region increased by 69 percent compared to 57 percent for the state as a whole.

- Residents are highly educated, more likely than the rest of the state to possess a high school diploma and a bachelor's degree.

While the Cape is viewed as a single regional entity, it often doesn't act like one. If we – and I count myself as a life-long Cape Cod summer resident – work as a unified block from Provincetown to Sandwich, we become a significantly more potent political force both on Beacon Hill and in Washington.

The Cape has benefited greatly from the effective representation of its elected leaders. Congressman Bill Delahunt and state Sen. Rob O'Leary have been strong

But separate voices addressing disparate issues leave the Cape's political clout lost in the shuffle. Boston, a city of dramatically different neighborhoods and agendas, has long mastered the art of working as one to dramatically increase its political power.

and effective voices on regional issues, and state Sen. Therese Murray now chairs the powerful Senate Ways and Means Committee, setting budgetary priorities for the state.

The region is facing a slate of regional issues that require solutions that at least partially can be found at both the state and federal level, including transportation infrastructure development and maintenance, protection of the Cape's sole source aquifer, wastewater treatment problems, coastal zone management and economic development.

The rapid and dramatic changes happening on Cape Cod – the skyrocketing cost of living most of all – have a human cost too.

Since 1990, the population of Barnstable County has increased by 23 percent. That is four times the rate of the state's overall population. The Islands

have seen even greater growth. Much of the increase has been attributed to increases in year-round residents and retirees, and each group presents its own challenges.

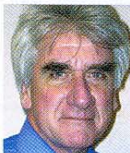
The influx of retirees is coupled with a rapidly graying population, making Barnstable County, with 23 percent of its residents over the age of 65, not only the oldest county in Massachusetts, but older than the state of Florida, which counts 17 percent of its population over the age of 65.

As the Cape increases its year-round population, it faces pressures to maintain a year-round economy and a year-round workforce; and as a result, the region is affected by year-round problems – affordable housing, health care and education.

Housing costs have moved beyond the reach of many workers, with the average price of a home on Cape Cod reaching almost \$400,000 this past year. In Barnstable County alone, over the past five years, the median price of a home has more than doubled from \$147,900 to \$310,000 in 2003.

We need to work as a unified region to bring federal and state help to bear on these problems.

The region's political influence will continue to grow along with its economic vitality. It should provide the Cape's elected officials with a unique opportunity to make a terrific impact on these issues as the new legislative session begins and to develop a unified legislative agenda that reaches key lawmakers in Boston and Washington, producing results that benefit the whole region. ■



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