



## An Education and Media Campaign for Barnstable County

**Problem and Strategic Goals:** More than 85% of the residents on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, depend on septic systems for wastewater treatment. Over the last decade, nitrogen from septic systems has begun to affect the water quality of Cape saltwater ponds, bays and estuaries. Nitrogen contributes to algae blooms and weed growth, consuming oxygen and reducing water quality. Eutrophication can harm fish and shellfish populations and kills eelgrass that protects local marine life. Tourism, property values and employment in the fishing and shell fishing industries - the mainstays of the Cape Cod economy - could be severely affected over the long term. How could Cape Cod business, community, education and environmental leaders address this challenge? Communities are preparing Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plans (CWMPs) and the MA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is helping to fund studies of nitrogen loading, but how could leaders reach Cape residents to educate and encourage them to support potentially expensive solution? The Barnstable County Wastewater Implementation Committee (WIC) decided that a grassroots educational campaign was the way to encourage understanding of the issues and prepare communities to make decisions about how each would address this quality of life issue.

**Research and Marketing Objectives:** RVA met with members of the WIC Education Committee to understand the county's goals. County, business, environmental and public health leaders were represented on the committee. They wanted to provide information for decision making without dictating solutions to the 15 Cape Cod towns. Most are in some phase of the planning process and they may chose different solutions. So the campaign had to provide information, reach residents with varying levels of knowledge (or lack of knowledge), reinforce their connection to the beautiful Cape environment and account for age levels. The campaign also had to reach summer residents, who would be part of the solution financially through any local taxes or assessments.

**The Campaign:** RVA worked with the Center for Policy Analysis at UMass/Dartmouth to develop a Cape-wide telephone survey. The 600-person survey tested knowledge of wastewater, septic system use, Cape water quality, willingness to invest in remediation and sources of information (trusted, kinds of media, etc.). The data showed that most people had little understanding of the impact of nitrogen from septic systems on the coastal waters; thought that

business septic systems were to blame; felt they had no personal role in causing pollution; strongly supported protecting the environment of the Cape because the quality of life is why they chose to live there. They were also willing to invest in the environment and got most of their news from regional newspapers (85%), radio and TV. RVA developed a three-part campaign. Three campaign themes and posters address the issues. **“What’s Your Wastewater IQ”** presents short true/false quizzes aimed at improving knowledge about septic systems and



nitrogen. **“Meet NiTro and Bloomer”** uses animated characters to explain how nitrogen enters bays, estuaries and harbors and affects water quality, often causing algae blooms. **“I’m a Cape Keeper”** introduces real Cape Cod residents, fishermen, inn keepers, grandparents and environmentalists, who tell listeners and viewers of a **Public Service Campaign** why they are keeping the Cape safe for the future. Other elements of the campaign included a **poster and essay contest** for Cape Cod students; **opinion editorials** and letters to the editor in regional newspapers; a **pamphlet** on septic systems and nitrogen; a website – [www.capekeepers.org](http://www.capekeepers.org) - with links to environmental and community sites; and development of a **speaker training program** and **PowerPoint presentation**.

The themes addressed a range of age cohorts and levels of knowledge. Using Cape Cod residents, business owners and “regular” people invited other residents to identify with the campaign on a personal level. The characters NiTro (nitrogen) and Bloomer were popular with students and teachers.

We also reached out to other partners, included the Waquoit Bay Estuarine Reserve, which took part in the speaker training and the Utility Contractors Association of New England (UCANE), which sponsored a poster and essay contest for Cape Cod students.

**Budget Allocation:** The first phase of the campaign, \$135,000, went toward the survey research, development of campaign strategy (in conjunction with the Horsley Witten Group), creative and graphics (Top Floor Design), and filming for the video and audio PSAs. In addition, the team designed a website, produced a flyer on septic system impacts, printed theme posters, and launched a media campaign in Cape Cod publications (press releases, opinion editorials, letters to the editor, speaker training and PowerPoint presentations. With a second budget of approximately \$40,000, the PSAs went on the air at three Cape Cod radio stations for 8 weeks during the summer. The team prepared html notices, book marks, and distributed Cape Keepers pins and kits. Video PSAs were sent to regional media, but there were not enough funds for a paid marketing campaign.

**Results and Verification:** The education committee intends to retest knowledge of the issues through another Cape-wide survey in 2008, if funding is available. Media coverage of the topics of wastewater, nitrogen and phosphorus, a similar nutrient, has increased and the topic is presented in local and regional publications punalmost daily. Region 1 of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) gave the Cape Keepers Campaign an Environmental Merit Award in April 2007, citing its “intense public awareness campaign reaching out to all age groups” that has been a model for other communities during a time of financial constraints and limited resources.