



Opinion

## County government: The nuts and bolts

**By Mary Chaffee**

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Do you eat at Cape Cod restaurants or swim at town beaches?

Does your town dredge its inlets? Do you harvest or eat shellfish?

Have you experienced a hurricane or power outage here?

Does your town have a police or fire department? Does your town buy office supplies?

Does your town use AmeriCorps for natural resources projects? Do you appreciate how uncontrolled Cape development before 1990 is now managed to protect the environment and culture?

Are you concerned about vaping by Cape youth?

If you answered “yes” to any of these, you or your town have benefited from Barnstable County government services.

Cape Cod has unique economic and environmental issues that make county government valuable here. Most Cape towns are small and rural, and could not afford to offer the services Barnstable County provides. Some residents receive indirect benefits – such as eating at restaurants inspected for safety by county personnel. Others seek out specific county benefits – like submitting tick testing to determine if it was infected with disease when it bit someone, taking horticulture training, or obtaining a loan to replace a failed septic system.

Though 14 Massachusetts counties operated in the 1600s, by the 1900s they grew to be, at worst, outposts of petty graft and corruption and, at best, lazy and ineffective bureaucracy (according to writer Jennifer

Babson). Middlesex County led the bad behavior parade: It defaulted on a bond and its bond rating plummeted to junk status.

Over time, the Massachusetts Legislature grew tired of rescuing mismanaged counties, and weakened county governments by eroding their revenue. Ultimately, the Legislature passed a bill leading to most counties' abolishment.

But Barnstable County was an exception to county government failures. A state legislative committee commended Barnstable County's fiscal responsibility, community services, and voter support. In 1988, the legislature passed the Barnstable County Home Rule Charter, providing the county with independence and a unique structure. Barnstable County voters affirmed the act.

The charter gave the new regional government "the means and structure to deal with regional issues which transcend the existing boundaries of municipal governments." In 1990, the legislature added the Cape Cod Commission as the county's land use and planning agency.

Barnstable County government purpose is to enhance the quality of life for county citizens. Its bicameral (two house) structure is the only of its kind in Massachusetts. The Board of Regional Commissioners ("County Commissioners") is the executive branch and the Assembly of Delegates is the legislative branch. The two branches operate with checks that maintain balance between the two arms of government.

Three county commissioners are elected "at large" every four years in partisan races. They supervise the county's revenue collection and spending, oversee daily operations, care for county property, and propose the annual budget.

The county administrator leads daily activities and reports to the commissioners (similar to a town administrator's and select board).

Fifteen delegates to the Assembly of Delegates are elected to two-year terms in non-partisan races. Each delegate represents one town and, when casting most votes, each delegate's vote is weighted proportionately to the town's population. The assembly acts by passing ordinances (binding actions) and adopts resolutions (statements of opinion) on matters of regional importance. The county's annual budget and capital requests are approved by the assembly.

Citizens are engaged in county government operations through participation on about 15 advisory boards including the County Coastal Management Committee and the County Economic Development Council. Town representatives participate in groups like the Rabies Task Force, the Hoarding Task Force, and the Regional Emergency Planning Committee.

Services Barnstable County government provides include:

- Bulk purchasing that reduces town costs, e.g., 60 percent on office supplies
- Shellfish provision to towns at reduced rates and shellfish habitat assessment
- Bathing beach water quality monitoring
- Dredging at a reduced rate
- Emergency planning and response coordination
- Municipal solid waste and recycling program support
- Children's Cove compassionate child sexual abuse services
- Human rights education and community services
- Human services including Medicare education for seniors (SHINE) and opioid crisis services
- Public health nursing services including immunizations

- Restaurant inspection support and food safety classes
- County police and fire training that saves Cape towns money
- Tobacco control assistance to boards of health including enforcing regulations, and tobacco and vaping education
- Public and private water supply testing
- Septic system research to determine if manufacturer's claims are accurate

The county's budget has been level for several years due to spending controls and savings from an early retirement program. Most county revenue is from a Registry of Deeds' excise tax that produces about \$10 million each year. The 15 Cape towns pay the county an assessment based on population (each Cape household contributes about \$25). The county attracts grants to supplement its revenue, such as a recent \$1.75 million grant to restore coastal habitat.

The Cape Cod Commission is funded by a separate assessment from each town.

Currently, county government is working with the Cape's legislative delegation to eliminate financial liability from the county sheriff's department (the department was transferred to the state, but Barnstable was the only county left burdened with paying retirement benefits). Stimulated by the Assembly of Delegates, efforts are underway to address climate change including installing solar panels over parking areas and purchasing electric vehicles.

After water contamination occurred at the county Fire Training Academy, the county took quick action to stop further contamination, restore water quality, and launch plans to relocate the Academy to Joint Base Cape Cod. The county is suing the manufacturer of the firefighting compound that led to the contamination.

The assembly is reviewing the county charter as required every five years, and is examining a recall process for elected officials. The assembly has scheduled a representative from Holtec, the firm decommissioning the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Plant, to appear before them Nov. 20 to address safety questions.

To learn more about county government, visit [barnstablecountyhrc.org](http://barnstablecountyhrc.org) or watch meetings at [youtube.com/user/BarnstableCounty](https://youtube.com/user/BarnstableCounty). To learn about the Cape Cod Commission, visit [capecodcommission.org](http://capecodcommission.org).

*Dr. Mary Chaffee is Brewster's Delegate to the Barnstable County Assembly of Delegates and is vice chairman of Brewster's Select Board.*

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