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Cape Cod needs a land bank

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As a contentious debate over the future of county government was brewing, the voters of Cape Cod spoke clearly this fall in support of a top priority for the region: a land bank for Barnstable County. The Legislature should act promptly to pass the legislation the voters asked for in November.

When my great-grandfather immigrated to the United States at the turn of the century and began his summer research projects at the Marine Biological Laboratory, he came to a Cape Cod far different from the one we know today.

It was a peninsula dominated by farming and fishing, a region with low population density and wide swaths of open space.

Much has changed. The Cape has become one of the nation's most desirable vacation destinations. Its economy has expanded. Land has become a scarce commodity. In my lifetime its population has doubled.

In response, Cape Codders have created new regional mechanisms to manage development. Today the Cape Cod Commission evaluates the impact of regionally significant development projects. The Cape Cod Economic Development Council works to attract businesses to the peninsula. In all, the voters of Barnstable County have often joined together to call for change when it is needed. This fall they passed a referendum — by more than 10,000 votes and majorities in all 15 towns — calling for a land bank.

A regional land bank is not a new idea for South-eastern Massachusetts. Faced with explosive growth and the need to purchase conservation land, our neighbors on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard have created similar institutions. The results have been impressive. On Nantucket the land bank and its collaborators are protecting some one-third of the island's unique natural heritage.

The residents of the two islands know that their land banks represent good economics. Conservation land does not hurt local economies; it strengthens them. Property values are increased. Water supply is

protected. Community infrastructure costs are kept down. New residents are asked to pay their fair share for these benefits. The net result for islanders has been positive, and even many of those who initially opposed the land banks now support them.

A decade after Paul Tsongas's call to curb new development on Cape Cod, the region faces new threats. Its residents are deeply concerned about the region's drinking water supply, which is being threatened by toxic plumes emanating from the Massachusetts Military Reservation.

Federal efforts to clean it up have been hampered by bureaucracy and our poor understanding of the Cape's soil and hydrology. Loss of scenic value to resurgent development is also a threat to tourism. The Land Bank is an essential and locally account-

able tool to help the Cape protect its drinking water and the strength of its economy.

Now is not the time to listen to the rumblings of those opposed to the Cape Cod land bank. Its financing mechanism is equitable and protects lower-income fam-

ilies. The bill was also designed with input from all parties.

Land Bank opponents say it would "set a dangerous precedent" and "skirts the democratic process." The opposite is true. Other regions in Massachusetts that are considering similar institutions need only look to the islands to see the benefits of this "dangerous precedent." Cape Codders ignored a well-financed campaign to defeat the ballot initiative in November. The Legislature should do the same now.

Many in Massachusetts look to Cape Cod as a place of unique and historical character. This heritage forces residents to work together to face difficult development choices. In today's political climate, the debate over public policy is framed in terms of local control, public-private partnerships, and support only for those regional and county entities that serve an indispensable function. Cape Cod's land bank fits the bill.

**The voters have
already spoken;
now let's act.**

Ian Bowles of Falmouth, a member of the Cape Cod Land Bank steering committee, was a Democratic candidate for the US House of Representatives from the 10th District in 1996.