

## 10-21-11 Something's Fishy

What's past is prologue. People tell me that the West Monponsett Pond has always been brown in color. We do have a lot of iron and tannins in some of our local waters. However, the West Monponsett Pond was not always green. In the last decade, it has grown greener and greener from algae, to the point that, for most of the summer, the pond is closed and advisories posted due to the algal blooms. At times, it is as thick as pea soup and it can smell so bad that calls to the fire and police with concerns of gas leaks have cost the town of Halifax a lot of money. They had to respond in case it was gas; but it wasn't. It was the algae.

Some people get headaches from the smell of the algae. It is possible for foul odors to give us a headache but I think the stress of sadness and frustration are additional causes for the pain. This year saw an increase in that frustration, as the algae spread to the East Monponsett Pond as well and the season of closed beaches concluded with a fish kill. Hundreds of dead fish along the shores the West Monponsett Pond and scores along the East, attracted sea gulls to feast upon the manna from, wherever dead fish come from.

Young children are growing up with new versions of old jokes. I can just hear it now: What's brown and green and smelly all over? The Monponsett Ponds! Ha, ha, ha!

The people living on those ponds truly love them and they want to know what can be done. One plan is to treat the ponds with alum, which will bind with the phosphorous and sink to the bottom. You see, the algae need a food source and phosphorous from fertilizers is one major source. Our Department of Environmental Protection says that we should solve the problem of feeding the algae before we treat with alum. That makes sense. Why keep treating if we are going to simultaneously keep feeding? But how do we prove where the nutrients come from? What if, just what if, we were to spend a whole lot of money on a wastewater treatment plant (not that I know where it could possibly be located) and the algae returned as usual the following summer? It would be very expensive proof that we were wrong. That scenario would prove the nutrients were not from old septic systems but from some other source.

Discovering the source(s) of nutrients is one part of solving the algae riddle. Another part is to stop interfering with nature and let the water flow as it used to. (This is not rocket science, is it?) So, what has already happened that set the stage for the green and foul smelling performance? (Sotto voce: You do remember, don't you? We are talking about the prologue and that sets the stage for what unfolds during the play.)

In 1984, an act of legislature allowed the city of Brockton to use the water of Halifax's Monponsett Ponds from autumn to spring by diverting the water over to Kingston's Silver Lake.

Thus, the Monponsett Ponds became tributaries to a surface water supply, with Silver Lake being the surface water supply. I don't understand why this was allowed in the first place. It reminds me of allowing the extreme build-out of Los Angeles by bringing water in from far away.

The written act of legislature makes for some very interesting reading, though. For instance, Brockton is supposed to maintain the ponds, even as recreational resources.

What does the city of Brockton do to maintain the water quality of the Monponsett Ponds? I don't know. They have thanked us for our efforts, though. The Halifax Board of Health has been praised on many occasions by Brian Creedon, Brockton's Water Commissioner, for their proactive measures to protect the ponds. (I'll tell you about them another time.) People of Halifax have been asking the city of Brockton for many years now to, at a minimum, open and maintain the dam so that water can flow from east to west, as nature intended. Brockton now has an additional source of water with their desalinization plant. It is time for Brockton to help Halifax. We need to sit down together and talk.

Halifax also needs assistance in discovering the sources of phosphorous and nitrates. We don't have the funding for testing pond water samples. Will DEP help us? Would the Cranberry Growers Association help by backing up their claim that the cranberry bog owners do not discharge water into the West Monponsett Pond? They claim that when people hear the pumps, it is water being drawn from the pond, never being discharged into it. I wonder where all that water goes. Between Brockton damming the water and the cranberry bogs taking the water, wouldn't we now have a West Monponsett Basin? We would finally have our leaching area for the much desired sewage treatment plant!

The prologue continues next time by continuing the exploration of the past. An amazing and rich history reveals our possible future.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. The ideas presented are hers and do not necessarily represent the Board of Health's. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*