



## Barnstable County: How it Works and the Services it Provides Cape Cod

### Barnstable County Offices

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The mission of Barnstable County is to promote and sustain a pro-active open government that enhances the quality of life for the citizens of Barnstable County.

### Barnstable County Government's Purpose

"We the people of Barnstable County, in order to gain for ourselves and for our communities, all the rights, powers, privileges, duties and obligations which may now or in the future be derived from a regional government providing extensive services to its region known as Barnstable County and being fiscally sound, do establish for ourselves and for our communities the means and structure to deal with regional issues which transcend the existing boundaries of municipal governments. This revised home rule charter for Barnstable county places the power and responsibility to deal with the unique problems of Barnstable county in a regional government directly responsible to the people of Barnstable County."

*—Preamble, Barnstable County Home Rule Charter (adopted 1988, revised 2000)*

### Introduction

Barnstable County government, and the 15 Cape Cod towns, work together to address common challenges. Water quality protection is a vital collaboration, but the County provides numerous services like dredging and emergency response, that improve the quality of life for county residents and save money for municipalities.

### History and Role of Barnstable County Government

Barnstable County was established in 1685. Though initially Massachusetts counties largely had a judicial function, more responsibilities that were added over time included administering penal systems, supervising certain health facilities, highways, agriculture, registers of deeds, and registers of probate. Over time, some Massachusetts counties devolved into corruption and ineffective bureaucracy. Ultimately, the Massachusetts legislature abolished most.

#### Barnstable County Facts

|                              |                                   |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Population:                  | 212,990 (2019 U.S. Census Bureau) |
| Land area:                   | ~412 square miles                 |
| Fresh water:                 | 16 square miles                   |
| Coastline (including Canal): | 560 miles                         |
| Median Household Income:     | \$70,621 (datausa.io)             |
| Median Property Value:       | \$384,100 (datausa.io)            |

But Barnstable County had been recognized as an exception commended by a state committee for its fiscal responsibility, community services, and voter support. In 1988 the state legislature passed the Barnstable County Home Rule Charter preserving county government. The Act established the unique bicameral structure that now serves Cape Cod. Barnstable

County is one of only a few remaining Massachusetts county governments and is the only with an executive and legislative branch.

## The Barnstable County Home Rule Act of 1988 and the County Charter

The Barnstable County Home Rule Act created a charter that guaranteed certain rights of home rule for the county. The Barnstable County Home Rule Charter:

- Increased citizen participation in County government,
- Established a legislative branch with the power to enact ordinances,
- Established an executive branch with the authority to exercise supervision and direction over all Cape Cod regional government agencies,
- Defined the County's fiscal procedures and revenues, and
- Identified municipal petition and citizen's initiatives procedures.

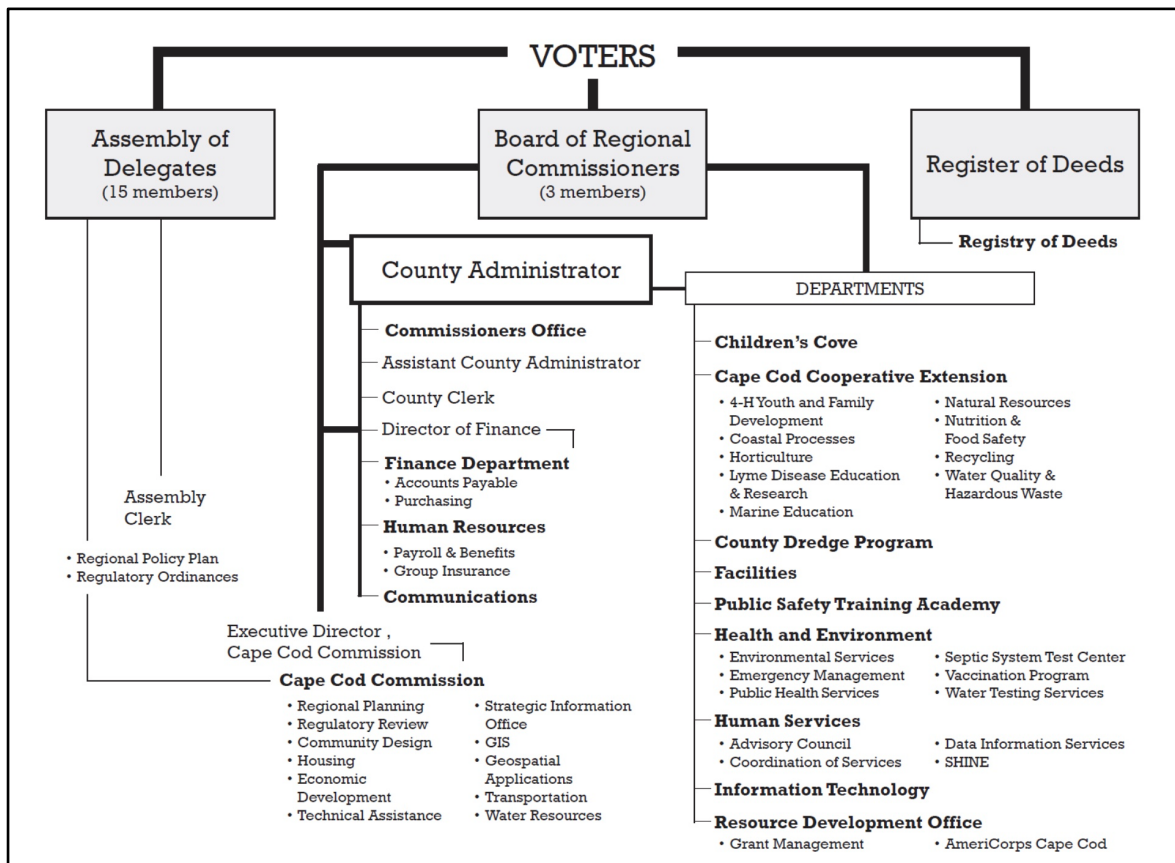
## Cooperation Between the County and Local Governments

The County Charter encourages Cape Cod towns to make the most effective and efficient use of their resources by cooperating with each other through County government to provide services and facilities that best serve county residents.

## Cape Cod Commission

Shortly after the Cape Cod regional government was established, the Massachusetts legislature passed the Cape Cod Commission Act of 1990. This created the Cape Cod Commission, a regional planning department for the County with regulatory power.

## Barnstable County Government Organization



(Source: Barnstable County Government, 2020)

## Legislative Branch: The Barnstable County Assembly of Delegates

*"The legislative powers of the Cape Cod regional government shall be exercised by an assembly of delegates consisting of fifteen members." (Barnstable County Charter, Sec. 2-1)*

The Assembly of Delegates is the legislative arm of Barnstable County government. Fifteen Delegates serve in the Assembly, one elected on a nonpartisan basis from each of the Cape towns. A Speaker and Deputy Speaker are elected as the Assembly leaders. A Clerk is also elected from outside the Delegates to administer the Assembly's daily activities. Delegates are elected to two-year terms by voters in their municipality.

**Weighted Voting.** The Assembly uses a weighted voting system where each Delegate's vote is weighted proportionally to the population of the municipality they represent (based on the most recent U.S. census).

**Ordinances.** The Assembly governs by passing ordinances—binding actions approved by a majority of Delegates. Assembly Delegates pass ordinances following these steps:

1. Ordinance introduction by a Delegate or Board of Regional Commissioners.
2. Public hearing on ordinance.
3. Adoption, with or without amendment, by a weighted majority of Delegates.
4. Approval by Board of Regional Commissioners.
5. If the Commissioners disapprove, the Assembly may override by a vote representing two-thirds or more of the County's population.

**Resolutions.** The Assembly also votes on resolutions to express its opinion on major issues of regional importance. Resolutions are not binding.





## Executive Branch: Board of Regional Commissioners

*“The executive powers of the Cape Cod regional government shall be vested solely in the board of regional commissioners and may be exercised whether directly by such board, or through the several regional agencies under its direction and supervision.” (Barnstable County Charter, Sec. 3-2)*

Three regional commissioners, often referred to as county commissioners, lead the executive branch of County government. They are elected on a partisan basis to four-year terms. The commissioners:

- Direct County agencies,
- Submit the County budget to the Assembly of Delegates,
- Have care of County property,
- Supervise revenue collection and disbursement,
- Report on the financial and administrative condition of the County,
- Propose measures to the Assembly,
- Consider support or veto of Assembly ordinances, and
- Appoint and remove the County administrator.



### **Regional Commissioners**

Chair Ronald Bergstrom (Chatham), Vice Chair Sheila Lyons (Wellfleet), Mark Forest (Yarmouth)

## Barnstable County Administrator

The Barnstable County Administrator leads and oversees County government operations, and ensures County policies are implemented and that finances and personnel are effectively managed. The County Administrator works under the policy direction and is evaluated by the Board of Regional Commissioners.

The County Administrator is responsible for overseeing development of the County's annual operational and capital budgets and keeps the County Commissioners, Assembly of Delegates, and the public informed on County services and issues.



**Barnstable County  
Administrator John Yunits Jr.**  
(Credit: Capenews.net)

## Barnstable County Sheriff

Responsibility for the Barnstable County Sheriff's services was transferred to the state in 2010.

## Barnstable County Services

Barnstable County provides a broad array of services to municipalities and individuals. Many County programs are ones that the largely rural, small Cape Cod towns could not afford to provide for themselves. County services are necessary especially in small towns that experience extreme

population growth in summer months. Economies of scale are produced through regional services.

| <b>Barnstable County Services</b>  | <b>Description</b>   |
|--|--|
| <b>Adult nutrition education</b>   | Variety of education programs offered to support healthy eating.   |
| <b>Agriculture technical assistance</b>  | Plant management resources provided for municipal agencies and agricultural producers.   |
| <b>Affordable housing, economic development, regional transportation, and coastal resiliency</b> | Cape Cod Commission provides these services.   |
| <b>AmeriCorps Cape Cod Program</b>   | Supports all Cape towns with natural resource and other services.  |
| <b>Bathing beach monitoring program</b>  | Beach and pond water sampling for quality testing at 350 sites during Summer months.   |
| <b>Buy Local, Buy Fresh</b>  | Program supports buying local food.  |
| <b>Cape Cod Medical Reserve Corps</b>  | Volunteer team provides public health and emergency health support.  |
| <b>Children's Cove</b>   | Compassionate child sexual abuse services and advocacy.  |
| <b>Coastal flood and erosion services</b>  | Flood-plain planning, town guidance through FEMA planning programs to reduce insurance premiums for Cape homeowners.                                 |
| <b>COVID-19 services</b>   | County coordinates regional response to COVID including testing, vaccine distribution and promoting economic strategies to support local businesses. |
| <b>Deed, mortgage, land records</b>  | Registry of Deeds handles all County property records.   |
| <b>Dredge services</b>   | County dredges at a reduced rate in all Cape coastal areas.  |
| <b>Emergency planning</b>  | County coordinates services to address weather and public health emergencies.  |
| <b>Entomology (insect) services</b>  | Services include tick and other insect identification, education, prevention, and testing.   |
| <b>Fire and Rescue Training Academy</b>  | Provides regional public safety training.  |
| <b>Food Access Coordinator</b>   | Coordinates food access program across the County.   |
| <b>Food safety training</b>  | For restaurants to reduce foodborne illness; teaches proper sanitation measures.   |
| <b>Hoarding task force</b>   | Assists those struggling with compulsive cluttering.   |
| <b>Horticulture services</b>   | Classes and guidance from master gardeners.  |
| <b>Human rights</b>  | Advisory commission promotes equal opportunity.  |
| <b>Human services</b>  | Offers substance abuse, suicide prevention, homelessness programs, and other programs.   |
| <b>Landfill monitoring</b>   | Mandatory landfill post-closure services provided to 12 Cape towns.  |
| <b>Health agents logistical support</b>  | Provides professional support for Town Health Agents; assists with restaurant inspections, beach monitoring, and other actions as needed.            |
| <b>Massachusetts Alternative Septic System Program</b>   | Conducts septic technology research to confirm they protect as claimed.  |
| <b>Municipal shellfish propagation</b>   | Program offers group buying power to purchase young oysters and other shellfish; shellfish workshops and training provided.                          |
| <b>Waste reduction and recycling</b>   | Provides technical and other support for towns to assist in reducing and efficiently handling waste and recycling.                                   |
| <b>Police Training Academy</b>   | Regional training program for new recruits; serves all Cape police departments and saves towns money.  |
| <b>Procurement and purchasing</b>  | County offers bulk purchased to towns, maximizes buying potential.   |
| <b>Public health nursing</b>   | Offers wide variety health services, including immunizations.  |
| <b>Resource Development Office</b>   | Manages grants that defray services costs for towns.   |
| <b>Septic Loan Program</b>   | Assists owners of failed residential septic systems by providing low interest loans.   |
| <b>SHINE Medicare education</b>  | Health insurance education for Medicare-eligible residents.  |
| <b>Tobacco control program</b>   | Education for tobacco merchants and communities; assists local boards of health with regulation development.   |
| <b>Water quality laboratory</b>  | Lab conducts water testing of public water supplies and bathing beaches.   |

## County Revenue and Expenditures

Barnstable County expenditures are executed through the County's annual operating and capital budgets. County revenues are generated by:

1. Excise tax collected on county real estate sales,
2. Assessments on Towns receiving County services, and
3. Grants.

## County Committees with Citizen Members

Barnstable County residents may participate on county committees including:

- AmeriCorps Advisory Board
- Cape Cod Commission
- Children's Cove Advisory Board
- Coastal Management Committee
- Dredge Subcommittee (Coastal Mgmt. Committee)
- Economic Development Council Advisory Board
- Health Agents Coalition
- Health and Human Services Advisory Council
- Healthy Aging Steering Committee
- Hoarding Task Force Advisory Board
- HOME Consortium Advisory Council
- Human Rights Advisory Commission
- Metropolitan Planning Council
- Rabies Task Force
- Regional Emergency Planning Committee
- Regional Network on Homelessness Policy Board
- Regional Substance Use Council
- SE Mass. Aquaculture Center Advisory Board
- Water Protection Collaborative Governing Board

## Barnstable County Complex Map



## Sources

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