

With illustration (map)

Cutline: A bike path proposed for Chappaquiddick would be constructed along a 3.1-mile route on the south side of Chappaquiddick Road and Dike Road, to Dike Bridge.

Precis: A bike path proposed for Chappaquiddick has stirred impassioned debate over issues of safety, aesthetics, and changes to the rural Island landscape.

Chappy bike path gears up, opponents apply brakes

By Steve Myrick

For more than 30 years, Chappaquiddick has been at odds over bicycles. More specifically, the Island's residents have sparred over whether Chappy's rural isolation would be forever scarred by the introduction of a bike path, or whether it would make biking safer and reduce the number of automobiles on the roads. At least twice before, the battle over a dedicated path for two-wheelers has risen to a head, and both times, those who favored a path pedaled back to their corners in defeat. But over the past six months, the effort has shifted up again.

A path is proposed along the south side of Chappaquiddick Road and Dike Road all the way to Dike Bridge. While the argument is civil, feelings are running strong, with neighbor pitted against neighbor

over an issue that they see as nothing less than a fight for the future of Chappaquiddick.

“Before, we always got tired, and didn’t want to fight about it, so we backed off,” said Peter Wells, who owns the Chappy Ferry and supports the path. “Not this time.”

“It’s very divisive,” said Edo Potter, a lifelong Chappy resident who opposes the path. “It seems so unfair that this group should be charging ahead. The whole thing has been so underhanded.”

While it remains only an idea — with little certain about the surface, width, or even the precise location — the path has already spurred more than 50 letters, many of them with passionate arguments, to committees, associations, and town boards involved in the process.

## Paths rough and smooth

This past summer, a group called the Chappy Path Committee was formed to promote construction of a new bike path.

*(The latest committee report is available on [mvtimes.com](http://mvtimes.com))*

Many members of the committee are veterans of past bike battles, including Mr. Wells, who said he was part of a group that began discussing the idea in 1978.

“There might have been people that were talking

about it before that,” he said.

The committee floated the idea before the Chappaquiddick Island Association and the board of selectmen. It studied previous engineering studies and found them inadequate, and realized that a new survey of the route would be needed.

Yet to be decided is the surface and width of the path. A consensus seems to be emerging among bike path backers for a packed stone dust path, though there are questions about how much maintenance will be required, who will maintain it, and who will pay for maintenance. Highway superintendent Stuart Fuller strongly supports an asphalt path built to standard state guidelines. He says an asphalt path would require very little maintenance.

In mid-October, the committee determined that Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds might be available to finance part of the project. With the CPA deadline just three days away, and in haste much criticized by proponents, the committee began compiling an application. The application asked for \$27,842 for an engineering study of the route, and \$47,000 to construct a demonstration path. The demonstration path proposed was a quarter-mile packed stone dust surface, from the Chappy ferry landing to Manaca Hill Road, through town-owned conservation land known as the Gardner property. “An esthetically appealing path will help convince skeptics of the merits of further path development,” wrote the committee in its CPA application. “This will

allow determination of how well the surface withstands the stress of Chappy weather and use.” The Edgartown Community Preservation Committee decided that the engineering study is an appropriate use of CPA funds, and voted to send the request for an engineering proposal to the annual town meeting, where voters will decide whether to approve the funds. The committee decided against sending the issue of a demonstration path to the town meeting.

### Survey says?

The committee says it has moved forward with the idea, because it has support from a majority of Chappy residents. “We’re not trying to pull the wool over anybody’s eyes, or push something against the desire of the majority,” said Bob Colvin, who chairs the Chappy Path Committee. He points to two surveys. While he readily admits they are not scientific polls, he says an email survey in the summer showed that 70 percent of year-round and seasonal residents favored a bike path. A second email survey on December 7, after the project evolved into an engineering study and demonstration path, showed 57 percent favored that idea, while 35 percent opposed it.

But opponents dispute whether a majority actually favors the plan, as defined so far. They say many people are holding judgment until they know more about the size of the path, the surface, and the cost.

An informal online vote at a web site created by Chappy resident Roger Becker, yesterday showed 156 people in favor of the bike path, and 148 against, a 51 to 49 percent split.

## Two wheels, two sides

There are as many facets of the argument as spokes on a bicycle wheel, but the dispute centers on three basic differences: safety, aesthetics, and the general category of increasing pressure on Chappaquiddick. For Mr. Colvin, safety is the primary issue. He says inexperienced bike riders take a risk traveling the road along with vehicle traffic.

“There are a lot of people who are willing to take the chance,” said Mr. Colvin. “I’m willing to take the chance. I’m an experienced bicycle rider, I ride on the streets of Boston.” But opponents point out that, according to Edgartown police, there has never been an accident involving a car-bike collision on Chappaquiddick, since they began compiling computerized statistical reports. Police say there were eight serious bicycle accidents reported to police from 1988-2005. But proponents of the path say they have observed numerous near misses and dangerous situations.

“I rode my bike to the ferry at least twice a day this past summer,” wrote Mr. Wells in a letter supporting the path. “On at least half of the trips I was compelled to get off onto the shoulder because I felt endangered

by the automobile traffic.”

Ms. Potter calls the safety issue a red herring. “If it were a question of safety, I might feel differently, but it isn’t. The most dangerous part of a bike path is where it crosses a driveway.”

Bob Clay, another opponent of the path, echoes that point. “Bike paths are not necessarily any safer than having bikes on the road,” he said. “Homeowners coming out of their homes, first crossing the bike path, then onto the road, is dangerous for everybody.”

Bike path backers say there are 11 driveways and six road intersections along the proposed routes, and good signs and bike safety education can mitigate concern about collisions at these points.

“I can tell you from personal experience,” said Mr. Wells, “that riding on a bike path is better than riding on the road.”

For opponents, often the first issue raised is aesthetics. “The road to East Beach and to the Wasque overlook presents a rare view, a rural view,” said Mr. Clay. “No matter how narrow the proponents of this path say it’s going to be, it will add a third lane to that road. That will really ruin that rural view.”

The town owns a 50-foot right-of-way along the proposed route. A main focus of the engineering study is to determine exactly where the roads lie within that right-of-way. Bike path backers believe the road could be moved in certain spots to make room for the path, without acquiring additional property or easements.

Ms. Potter is concerned about the addition of a bike

path to several spots along the proposed route, including the point where Chappaquiddick Road passes Caleb's Pond. "You can't move it, it's wetlands on one side, and sand dune on the other. Both are protected," said Ms. Potter. "They would have to build a bridge."

Mr. Colvin says while there are reasonable arguments about aesthetics, there are also exaggerations and misinformation floating around. He says aesthetics are a concern of his committee, too.

"We live on Chappy because we love the beauty," said Mr. Colvin. "We don't want to spoil that."

Also at issue is a factor that enters into nearly every dispute that boils up on Chappaquiddick, and that is how change might affect the rural nature of the Island so cherished by both residents and visitors.

"In the summer, the Chappy ferry lines are horrendous," said Mr. Clay. "Chappy is going to become a bike destination if you put paths out here. All this is going to amount to longer waiting lines."

Mr. Wells disputes any significant delays in the ferry lines resulting from construction of a bike path. He and others say it might reduce vehicle traffic.

"I don't see any sense to believe it's going to attract a whole lot more people. If it attracts more people out of their cars, it would make the car lines shorter," said Mr. Wells.

"Chappy has such a wonderful rural feel," said Ms. Potter. "If the bike path is put in alongside the road, it's going to totally change it."

“There are some people who just don’t want anything that would attract more people,” said Mr. Colvin.

“It’s an argument that goes in the wrong direction. If we make Chappaquiddick really unpleasant everyone will stay way. That’s not what we want.”

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