

Chatham's Meeting Notices Migrating To The Cloud

by Tim Wood

CHATHAM --- Beginning Monday, the official town bulletin board — where notices of public meetings are posted — will migrate to the clouds.

The town has received permission from the state Attorney General's office to begin using an Internet-based service to post committee meeting notices, agendas and minutes. Town Clerk Julie Smith said the service will streamline the posting process and make more information available to the public.

"It's a very big step," she said, noting that the bulletin board in the foyer of the town offices has for years been the official location where meeting notices were posted.

New state Open Meeting Law requirements that went into effect last year posed some problems, however. Meeting notices had to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, resulting in the foyer being open at all hours, posing a potential security risk. Committees are also required to post an agenda with the meeting notice, something that could not be easily handled using the town's traditional posting format. While some committees tried to squeeze a list of agenda items on the small sheet that serves as the meeting notice, others provided printed agendas in a loose-leaf notebook stationed next to the bulletin board. Many committees weren't bothering to post agendas at all.

At last week's selectmen's meeting, resident Elaine Gibbs complained that agendas are frequently not posted and meeting minutes can take weeks or months to become available to the public. The new service, Mytowngovernment.org, will help alleviate those problems, Smith said.

Committee heads will be able to access the system to post their own notices and upload both agendas and minutes. Over the past two months, Smith and Information Technology Director Ray Medeiros held training sessions with both town staff and committee members. "Every one of them were thrilled

with the ease of use," Medeiros said.

For residents, the new system is simple and easy to use as well. The meeting link on the town's homepage will send users to Mytowngovernment.org, where a calendar will display a list of meetings. Click on a meeting listing and the page provides the date, time and location of the meeting, as well as either a listing of agenda items or a link to an agenda document or other relevant documents, such as the selectmen's meeting packet. Once minutes for a particular meeting are approved, they can be uploaded by the committee head, Smith said. Clicking on the meeting place will even bring up a map showing the location.

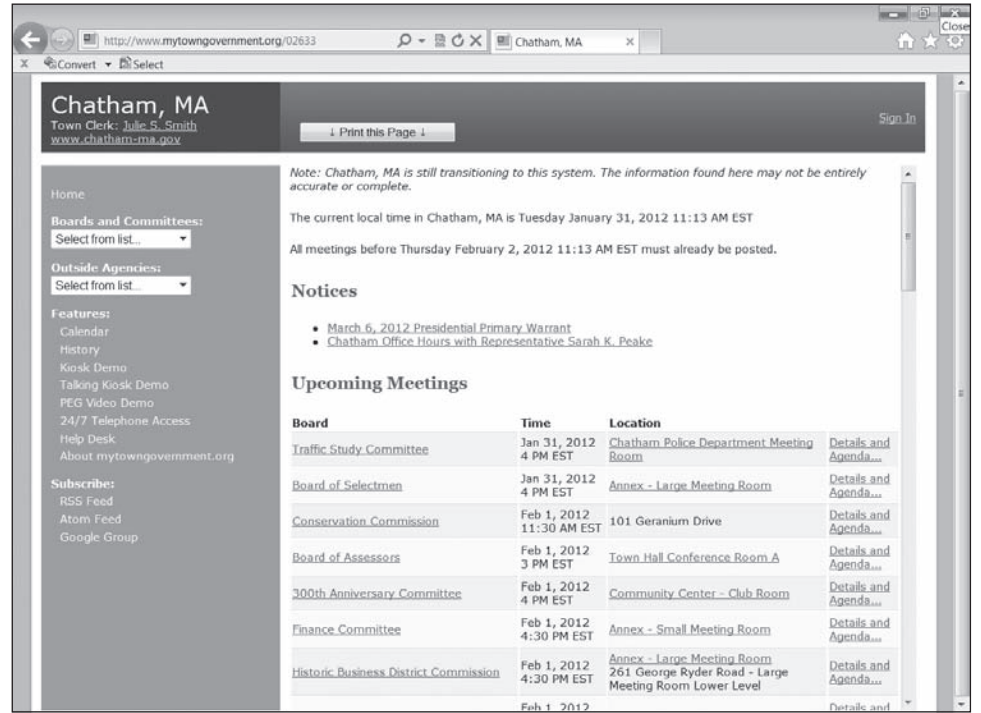
The site was developed by Joshua Smith, a long-time committee volunteer in Barre, for use by that town in order to comply with the revised Open Meeting Law. "As I was putting this site together, it became clear to me that making it a site that any town in the Commonwealth could use would be pretty easy," he wrote on the site. "So I did that." Smith set the system up using services available by Google, which hosts the website and data on its own "cloud" servers, which allows anyone with a valid password to access the system from any computer.

Best of all, the service is free, at least for now. Google has certain data limits, but until those are reached, Smith is offering the service to communities in the commonwealth at no charge. He suggests on the site that at some point, there will be a data storage fee, but probably no more than \$99 a year.

"The fact that it was free made it a no-brainer," said Medeiros.

The system also accommodates those without computer or Internet access. There is a 24/7 telephone number a resident can call, and by following the spoken instructions, hear a voice reads the town's meeting notices.

The new system will save committee members the time it takes to travel to the



As of Feb. 6, Mytowngovernment.org will be the official meeting notification site for the town of Chatham.

town offices, fill out a form and submit it to the town clerk. Residents will also no longer have to come to the town offices to see if a meeting has been posted. Smith noted that while the town's website has long included a meeting calendar, it was never "official;" only the bulletin board at the town offices had that distinction.

"I think people are looking more toward getting information on line," she said, "and not having to drive downtown."

The new system also has safeguards built in to ensure compliance with Open Meeting Law. It will not allow a user to post a meeting if the 48-hour notice requirement can't be met, said Smith. If a committee wants to meet in a certain room but that room is already reserved, the user will get an alert about the conflict.

Residents can also sign up for e-mail notifications that will be automatically sent when

certain committees post meeting notices. The system also allows the town to set up a self-running kiosk, essentially a stand-alone computer in an accessible location, where the website will be displayed and be available to the public.

The system will also notify Smith's office whenever a meeting is posted and notices will be printed and kept on file. Minutes will also continue to be filed with the clerk. "We'll be keeping archival copies," Smith said.

The new meeting calendar will go live on Feb. 6.

"It just seemed like a neat idea," Smith said of the new system. "The program was available, it will save paper, and it will be a lot easier for people."

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Disentangling Whales Important But Dangerous Work

by Debra Lawless

CHATHAM --- Imagine standing in a small bobbing boat in the sea 70 miles off Chatham, sawing tangled, knotted rope from a 40-ton whale's head with a knife lashed to the end of a 35-foot pole.

And does the whale tread water delicately, grateful for your attempts to help? It does not. It flips around, fights you in the dark, murky waters, tries to dive or flee.

"Disentanglement is extremely dangerous work," Scott Landry of the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies (PCCS) told a packed auditorium in the Chatham Community Center Saturday morning in a talk sponsored by Outermost Harbor Marine in Chatham. "Whales are generally gentle unless they feel threatened. When faced with something new they feel fear."

When a disentanglement crew gets word an entangled whale or 1,200-pound leatherback turtle has been sighted, the crew jumps into its 34-foot rescue boat the Ibis that has been specially rigged to follow fast-moving whales at sea. Since whales can dive for up to 45 minutes, the challenge for the crew is to keep the whale on the surface so the crew can evaluate the problem and solve it — all before sunset.

Entanglement is the term used when a marine animal swims into commercial fishing gear and enmeshes itself in rope, nets and lines. The animal may carry away buoys and other equipment. Recent legislation has mandated that the floating lines between lobster pots be buried on the sea floor. But even this has a tradeoff: Humpback whales scuff their faces in the sand digging for eels and may become entangled that way.

Landry is a "level five primary disentangler" — only one of "five on earth," he said. (There are only 15 "level four" disentangles.) The training to disentangle whales takes a decade; Landry now works on a team of three that is on call 365 days of the year out of the non-profit PCCS. The work is done under a federal permit.

"We're committed to it," he said. "We take it extremely seriously."

The PCCS has been working with and studying whales now for 35 years and maintains a significant database.

In a fascinating one-hour PowerPoint lecture, Landry told the group that right whales are returning to Cape Cod Bay this winter. Meanwhile, humpback whales have departed the Cape for Puerto Rico. Fin whales and minke whales are also found off Cape Cod. Fin, humpback and right whales are all on the endangered species list.

Thanks to the extensive whale hunting business of the 18th and 19th centuries, "the population you see off Chatham today is the remnant of what used to be," he said.

The plankton-rich waters from the Bay of Fundy through Cape Cod Bay to Georges Bank are the "kitchen" for all whales. While the days of "Moby Dick" are gone, threats against whales today include boats running over their muscular flukes, used for swimming, and entanglements with fishing gear. Once entangled, the whale might drown, slowly starve, or live with the chronic pain of a rope cutting through its flesh and into its bone. While the entangled whale's fate remains uncertain, one thing is clear: a female whale will not calve. Since most whales give birth every other year, the longer the gear is attached to a whale, the greater the loss to the population as a whole. Since only 450 right whales remain, "every loss is a significant loss," Landry said.

"It's very cold-hearted math," Landry added. "We want to get as many females disentangled so they can give birth and we can get the population back up."

For the disentangler, the tools of the trade include a grappling hook, a work line, and a hook-shaped knife to cut away the rope. Last March an aerial team spotted an entangled right whale 70 miles east of Chatham. The crew had to cut away the rope using a knife on the end of a 35-foot pole while the whale was swimming at nine knots. "These animals are frightened," Landry reiterated. Complicating matters, this whale had created two slipknots in the rope. When it was finally cut free "this animal took off like a bat out of hell. No thank you's!" Landry said.

The crew worked unsuccessfully to free one whale's head from a rope for two years before turning to a crossbow with a specially modified "gobbler guillotine" head. In April, 35 miles east of Chatham, the crew—which had been training with the cross bow at a Truro firing range for a full year—



Scott Landry and Brian Sharp of the Marine Animal Entanglement Response team disentangling a humpback. Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies.

IMAGE TAKEN UNDER NOAA FISHERIES PERMIT 932-1489

had a chance to shoot the arrow across the whale's head. In passing, the arrow cut the rope. And in the process the whale got only a "paper cut," Landry said.

So what is the answer? How can accidental entanglements be prevented?

"If you got rid of rope, the entanglement problem would be gone overnight," Landry says. But he warns, "that's like saying 'you're welcome to drive your car but don't use wheels.'"

PCCS, conservation groups and commercial fishermen meet annually to discuss the problem, but so far no solutions have been found.

What should you do if you spot an entangled whale or turtle while boating?

Call the PCCS's 800 number or the Coast Guard. "Stand by. Keep a slow, steady course and keep 100 feet away," Landry says. Leave your boat's motor running so as not to spook the whale, and keep the whale within sight.

The PCCS marine animal entanglement hotline number is 1-800-900-3622. For more information visit www.coastalstudies.org.