

MVC Adaptation Master Plan Subcommittee (AMPC)

*Stakeholder Listening Session #2: Harbormasters
March 4, 2020, at the Olde Stone Building*

AMPC members and MVC staff present: Cheryle Doble, Alex Elvin, Christine Flynn, Joan Malkin, Kathy Newman, Ben Robinson, Richard Toole

Harbormasters present: Todd Alexander (Oak Bluffs), John Crocker (Tisbury), Chip Vanderhoop (Aquinnah).

Harbormasters not present: Ryan Rossi (Chilmark), Charlie Blair (Edgartown), Ally Moore (Harthaven)

Key concerns and ideas

GENERAL

- Harbormasters expressed four main areas of concern: fixed structures, sand transport, permitting and funding.
- Harbormasters seem to have good relationships with their selectmen.
- Towns would benefit greatly from a study showing the economic impact of the average vessel.
- Oak Bluffs has a jump on some adaptation issues, including its town subcommittee on culverts. Certain culvert projects will begin soon.
- A program involving a seawall, beach nourishment and groins would be a huge step forward for Oak Bluffs

FIXED STRUCTURES

- The 19th-century jetties in Oak Bluffs are sinking. Todd Alexander hopes to replace them before he retires.
- The bulkhead in Oak Bluffs is nearing the end of its life. When it gets rebuilt, the town will make it higher. (No need for a glass wall.)
- Oak Bluffs was up in arms over the height of the seawall near the Island Queen dock, but no one mentions it anymore.
- Tisbury has a grant from CZM for harbor protection. (?)
- Tisbury is working with Woods Hole (?) to improve their breakwaters. Crocker suggested working with the MVC on permitting.
- The Owen Park pier needs to be replaced, possibly with a floating pier. Feasibility should be known in the next few weeks.
- Towns may not be able to afford the cost of building to withstand major hurricanes.

SAND TRANSPORT

- The sand from Oak Bluffs all travels toward Edgartown.
- A sand transport study for Oak Bluffs is due in May.
- Aquinnah is still feeling the effects of Hurricane Sandy, which required at least two dredging projects.
- The beach near Owen Park is growing, but the DPU no longer comes in to relocate excess sand.

PERMITTING

- Permitting is a major hurdle for harbor projects, even small ones.
- Contractors won't touch jetty projects anymore because of the difficulty with permitting.
- Government agencies are becoming aware that permitting for certain projects needs to speed up.
- Political pressure to speed up the permitting process has led to reprisals from the permitting agencies later on.
- The town line between Aquinnah and Chilmark, which runs down the middle of Menemsha Channel and Menemsha Pond, further complicates permitting.

STORM PREPAREDNESS

- During strong storms, Tisbury and Oak Bluffs require everyone to leave the harbors, and to put their boats on moorings.
- Alexander disconnects the fuel dock in Oak Bluffs prior to strong storms. A fuel tank is buried in a lot near his office.
- The Oak Bluffs and Tisbury harbormasters have made progress in enforcing the length of stay in Lagoon Pond.

FUNDING

- Funding agencies will usually only fund projects that are shovel-ready, which itself requires a significant investment.
- Oak Bluffs installed its fuel dock partly to help fund other projects.
- Some grants are allocated based on the number of boats in the harbor, so adding slips in the West Basin could benefit Aquinnah.
- The Island's climate action plan could benefit funding since granting authorities seem to favor regional projects.

ELECTRIC BOATS

- Electric boats could potentially charge from the existing shore chargers, although it wasn't clear if those chargers could provide enough energy.
- The Menemsha Bike ferry was electric for its first 10 or 15 years.

Notable statements

"The Army Corps appears to report to nobody." – Todd Alexander

"Contractors now won't touch the jetties, because they are on the hook with permits." – Todd Alexander

"When they did the seawall by the Island Queen, people were up in arms because it was higher, but no one talks about it anymore." – Todd Alexander

"Sometimes you just have to give up." – Todd Alexander on the reality of retreat

“A hurricane will blast by in three to four days, but nor’easters back to back, that’s weeks sometimes.” – Chip Vanderhoop

“Sea-level rise is the first bit, then storm surge builds on that. We are just losing ground.” – Chip Vanderhoop

“If you go that route, you pay dearly the next time around.” – John Crocker on applying political pressure to speed up permitting

“We get everyone out, even in a strong nor’easter, put everyone on moorings, then every man for themselves.” – Todd Alexander on storm preparation

“After the election, everyone was screaming infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure. We should be jump on the bandwagon now, gets applications in, and let people see the need.” – Chip Vanderhoop

“They want a shovel-ready project before funding it.... You need money to get money.” – Todd Alexander on government funding

Summary of discussion

Todd Alexander discussed a 2016 study by Applied Coastal to address the 19th-century jetties in Oak Bluffs, which he said are sinking. The town hopes to repairing the existing jetties and dogleg and extending the southern jetty to protect the basin from coastal storms. Oak Bluffs also received a grant for a sand transport study that is due in May. Alexander said the sand from Oak Bluffs all travels toward Edgartown. He said a program involving a seawall, beach nourishment and groins would be a huge step forward, and he hoped to complete the jetty project before he retires.

Harbormasters agreed that permitting was a major hurdle to harbor projects, even small ones. Alexander recalled a nine-year process in Oak Bluffs to obtain funds for dredging, and in the end the town paid more (20% of the government cost) than if they had funded it themselves, since the total government cost was so high. He said contractors won’t touch jetty projects anymore because of the difficulty with permitting.

On the topic of a glass wall along the Oak Bluffs bulkhead, Alexander said he didn’t see how that would work. However, he noted that the bulkhead is nearing the end of its life, and when it gets rebuilt, the town will simply make it higher. He said that was the next big project, and no glass would be needed. He also noted that when the seawall near the Island Queen dock was installed, the town was up in arms, but no one mentions it anymore.

John Crocker said Tisbury takes a similar approach to protecting its harbor, and has a grant from Coastal Zone Management.

Chip Vanderhoop noted that any easterly storm goes into the West Basin in Aquinnah and eddies around, leading to a need for emergency dredging in the spring. “A hurricane will blast by in three to four days,” he said. “But nor’easters back to back, that’s weeks sometimes.” He said Aquinnah is still

feeling the effects of Hurricane Sandy, which required at least two dredging projects, including one at Herring Creek.

Alexander added that the projections for sea-level rise keep getting worse, but he believed government agencies were becoming more aware that permitting for certain projects needs to happen more quickly.

Tisbury is working with Woods Hole to improve their breakwaters, and Crocker suggested working together with the MVC on the permitting. He said a visioning meeting a couple of years ago included a discussion about extending the Eastville Jetty, but Ben Robinson said CZM had decided against that proposal. Crocker noted an idea from the 1880s, where the Army Corps considered having the jetty in Tisbury curl around, with an opening in it. Robinson noted that in the 1880s the town had a jetty between the two chops, but that such a solution now should be closer in, since only a portion of the harbor is exposed. Crocker suggested working together on those topics as well.

Crocker said the Owen Park pier needs to be replaced, possibly with a floating pier, which would help adapt to sea-level rise. He wasn't sure that solution is feasible, but expected to know in the next few weeks. He said the floating docks would be held in place by steel piles filled with concrete that could last more than 50 years. The town would need to build a regular "stick pier" into the water, which would connect to the floating docks, since the floating docks need at least three feet of water to function correctly.

On the topic of sand transport, Crocker said the beach near Owen Park was growing, and he recalled that it was once common for the Department of Public Utilities to relocate excess sand on the Island, but that doesn't happen anymore. He noted that there were four-foot waves in the harbor during the 1954 hurricane, but he questioned whether the town could afford the cost of building for that level of storm in the future.

Crocker said he typically brings project proposals to the town natural resources committee, and from there to the board of selectmen for approval. Alexander said he has never had problems with the Oak Bluffs selectmen signing off on his requests.

In terms of needed resources and information, Crocker said Island towns would benefit greatly from a study showing the economic impact of the average vessel. Alexander added that a study that Liz Durkee was involved with provides some insight in that regard for Oak Bluffs. Harbormasters also pointed to a need for more streamlined permitting, with Crocker arguing that state representatives often talk about that, but nothing comes of it. He cautioned that applying political pressure to speed up the permitting process has led to reprisals from the permitting agencies later on. At the same time, Christine Flynn argued that state departments are recognizing that permitting is becoming an issue.

Vanderhoop said the town line between Aquinnah and Chilmark, which runs down the middle of Menemsha Channel and Menemsha Pond, further complicates permitting in those towns, in part because there is some dispute as to what portions of the mooring field are in each town.

Similarly, the town line between Tisbury and Oak Bluffs runs down the middle of the Lagoon Pond, but Crocker and Alexander said the towns work well together. Alexander said Crocker is closer to the pond, so he often calls him when there is an issue. In recent years the towns have cracked down on boats anchoring in the Lagoon for more than the allowed time (three days in Oak Bluffs, seven days in

Tisbury), and Alexander said the difference is “night and day” compared to two years ago, with 99 percent of boaters now complying.

During strong storms, including noreasters, Tisbury and Oak Bluffs require everyone to leave the harbors, and to put their boats on moorings. But that seems to be the extent of the preparations. Alexander said one third of the moorings are inspected every year. In response to a question about the failure of screw-in moorings in the 1980s, he said the issue was that they hadn’t actually been screwed in, but installed with jets.

Alexander noted that Oak Bluffs has a jump on some adaptation issues, including its town subcommittee on culverts. He said certain culvert projects (?) would begin soon. He added that funding for the jetty project would depend on the year, but the town’s bulkhead project received a grant to cover 50% of the cost. He speculated that sea-level rise may lead to more funding sources in the future. One reason Oak Bluffs installed its fuel dock was to help fund other projects. (The revenue would be used to pay back loans if government funding were not available.) Alexander disconnects the fuel dock prior to strong storms. A fuel tank is buried in a lot near the harbormaster’s office.

On the topic of electric boats, Alexander suggested that they could charge from the existing shore chargers, although it wasn’t clear if those chargers could provide enough energy. Vanderhoop said the Menemsha Bike ferry was electric for its first 10 or 15 years, but when it broke down, it was replaced with a four-stroke engine.

Vanderhoop noted a widespread demand for infrastructure funding in recent years, and stressed the importance of applying for those funds now, in part to show the need. But Alexander pointed out that funding agencies will usually only fund projects that are shovel-ready, which itself takes a significant investment. “You need money to get money,” he said. Vanderhoop added that some grants are allocated based on the number of boats in the harbor, so adding slips in the West Basin could benefit Aquinnah by offering boaters an alternative to Menemsha Harbor. Alexander said the Island’s climate action plan could benefit funding since granting authorities seem to favor regional projects.