

MVC Adaptation Master Plan Subcommittee (AMPC)

Stakeholder Listening Session #3: Planning Boards

April 30, 2020, on Zoom

AMPC members and MVC staff present: Liz Durkee, Alex Elvin, Meghan Gombos, Tristan Israel, Ben Robinson, Richard Toole

Planning board members and administrators present: Bill Cleary (Oak Bluffs), Doug Finn (Edgartown), Pat Harris (Tisbury), Virginia Jones (West Tisbury), Ben Robinson (Tisbury), Jane Rossi (West Tisbury), Dan Seidman (Tisbury), Jim Wallen (Aquinnah), Sophia Welch (Aquinnah)

Key concerns and ideas

REGIONAL COLLABORATION

- More regional collaboration is necessary, including as it relates to recreational areas, forested land, watersheds, and neighborhoods that cross town borders.
- Importance of regional collaboration beyond the Vineyard, including with Nantucket and other islands around the world.
- The AIPB has been somewhat dormant, but could regroup and continue working on climate change issues Islandwide.

REGULATIONS AND POLICY

- Towns should be more proactive about development along their shores; even one or two new houses can have a big impact on coastal ponds.
- Houses over 3,000 square feet are subject to site plan review, but planning board recommendations are often ignored; how much power do the boards have in that regard?
- Planning boards can make progress in two main ways: writing bylaws and adopting master plans. Both could potentially be coordinated across all six towns.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

- The Vineyard should rely on its own resources where possible. Clarify what rules apply to bringing in trees from other states.

MOTIVATIONS

- The main challenge for the Island is getting people to prioritize ecology over profit.

- Profit motives no longer work in the long term; how we can move in a new direction as one Island, despite the unique characteristics of each town?
- Covid-19 is a wakeup call in terms of convincing town leaders that investing now will create significant savings later on. Need to drive this message home.
- Seasonal residents pay a large share of Island expenses, so trying change their behavior could be tricky when the message is coming from the year-round minority.
- Install visual aids around the Island, such as concrete posts or other markers, so that people can see how sea level changes over time.

Notable statements

"You don't have to go too far back from the ponds and you are in safe territory to do what you want." – Ginny Jones

"The bottom line is there is so much money being made on Martha's Vineyard that no change proposed is going to be successful until it can supersede that challenge. Until people can prioritize the benefits of ecology over their bank account, no other problem will be solved." – Doug Finn

"How do we get away from profit-driven, egocentric lifestyles, and then how do we get Island towns to work together to understand that we are one Island?" – Bill Cleary

"We can't focus just on the next annual town meeting." – Bill Cleary

"I think many locals will support climate change adaptation. The challenge is getting people in [official] positions to stand up for the changes and stick to their guns." – Doug Finn

"It takes a pandemic for Martha's Vineyard to work together. A virus in West Tisbury is the same as a virus Oak Bluffs, is the same as a virus in Chilmark. If we came to that realization, we would also realize that the water underneath the Island is the same sole source aquifer. Weather doesn't respect borders either." – Dan Seidman

Summary of discussion

Ginny Jones of West Tisbury said the towns should be more proactive about regulating development along their shores, since even one or two new houses can have a big impact on coastal ponds, which many people regard as their playgrounds rather than as ecological systems.

Ginny recalled seeing truckloads of mature trees from Michigan arriving at Tisbury Great Pond, but she said the site was outside of concom jurisdiction, since it was on a high bank, above a certain contour. Jane Rossi of West Tisbury noted that water and air quality has improved with the recent stay-at-home orders, and argued that leaving nature alone tends to help. Along those lines, she argued for the Vineyard to rely on what it already has, and she questioned the

need to bring in trees from other states. Doug Finn of Edgartown suggested reviewing what rules apply to bringing trees to Massachusetts, since even crossing the state line with firewood is illegal in Vermont. Liz Durkee added that the trees from Michigan are not native to the Island, and Ben Robinson added that climate change will likely change the mix of native plants in the coming decades. He advocated planting for tomorrow and not just today. The Polly Hill Arboretum website has a list of plants that do well on the Vineyard. Tisbury also has a list of native plants that it provides to developers.

Jane said that houses over 3,000 square feet are approved only by site plan review, and while the board can recommend changes to surveyors, architects, etc., those projects can't really be conditioned, and the recommendations are usually ignored. She wondered how to convey the message that the climate is fragile and we need to treat it with respect.

Doug questioned whether site plan review can't condition houses larger than 3,000 square feet, especially when protecting public ways, health concerns, etc. He noted that Edgartown has conditioned solar projects, which legally can't be denied. He also drew attention to efforts by the DRI checklist committee to establish a new item for large houses, and argued that the MV Builders Association will come down hard on anything that changes to how they do things. He said the main challenge for the Island is getting people to prioritize ecology over profit.

The conversation briefly touched on stormwater and denitrification, with Ginny acknowledging bylaws in West Tisbury that deal with stormwater but that are not often employed, and Doug adding that Edgartown generally defers to its concom and board of health to adjudicate stormwater management, in terms of water that crosses or is generated by a property.

On the topic of denitrification, Jane said West Tisbury does not have any such bylaw requirement for septic systems near its ponds. Oak Bluffs does not either, but Tisbury does in some areas. Edgartown has a limit on bedrooms in the Edgartown Great Pond watershed, which Ginny saw as something West Tisbury could emulate.

Ben stressed the importance of reviewing all town bylaws to see which ones are strongest and weakest, and to pursue updates where necessary. He said the next step would be to develop new bylaws that encourage more sustainable development on the Island.

The planning board representatives agreed that more regional collaboration is necessary in terms of climate change planning. Ginny noted that regional collaboration has been discussed at least since at least the 1850s. She also drew attention to the 1850 Henry Laurens Whiting map of the Island, which is available online with an interactive function that allows you to compare the landscape today. Richard Toole advocated for a more regional approach to permitting and building inspection, including a regional building inspector's office, or an Islandwide building code specialist. He argued that an energy code, for example, is only as good as its enforcement. Others added that recreational areas, forested land, watersheds, and neighborhoods on the Island often cross town borders and deserve more regional collaboration.

Representatives were asked what they most wanted to see in the Climate Action Plan. Bill Cleary of Oak Bluffs stressed the importance of big-picture thinking that involves the whole Island. He added that even with highly motivated volunteers, different groups moving in different directions can leave many issues unaddressed. He argued that profit motives no longer work in the long term, and asked how we can move in a new direction as one Island, despite the unique characteristics of each town.

Doug suggested that there are two ways to change people's behavior. The "easy way" is to impose regulations such as through the MVC, which will be met with opposition. The "hard way" is convincing them to prioritize long-term planning over short-term benefits (or Islandwide priorities over those of the wealthy and influential). Richard called the Covid-19 pandemic a wakeup call in terms of convincing town leaders that investing now will create significant savings later on. Doug added that significant change may come with the election or appointment of new members on towns boards.

On a related topic, Dan Seidman of Tisbury noted that that seasonal residents pay a large share of Island expenses, and that would also likely be true of adaptation initiatives. So trying to change their behavior could be a touchy subject when the message is coming from the year-round minority.

Ben said the planning boards can make progress in two main ways: writing bylaws to be adapted at town meetings, and adopting master plans for land use in each town. Both approaches could potentially be coordinated across all six towns, and both can be outlined in the Climate Action Plan. He added that the plan will not have all the answers, but will ask the necessary questions and provide a roadmap. The questions and answers will need to originate from the towns.

Richard noted that the 2009 Island Plan was an important achievement, but has mostly sat on shelves. Liz pointed out that the Island Plan did not address climate change adaptation, and she added that the Oak Bluffs Master Plan only does so within a 10-year time frame.

Planning board reps agreed that they could always use more knowledge about the coming impacts of climate change. Doug also noted that not every town official on the Island agrees that climate change exists. Ben mentioned a climate change modeling effort by the Woods Hole Research Center that will provide some useful data for Dukes County. He and others stressed the importance of regional collaboration beyond the Vineyard, including with Nantucket and other islands around the world. Ginny mentioned efforts on Prince Edward Island, and in the Caribbean and South Pacific, to address the impacts of climate change.

Closer to home, Jim Wallen of Aquinnah raised concerns about Lobsterville Road, which at some point will go under. He asked about the potential for rooftop solar on new structures, and inquired about installing visual aids around the Island, such as concrete posts or other markers, so that people can see how sea level changes over time. Certain pilings and other structures

have unofficially served that purpose as they become submerged or fall into the sea. However, it would be useful to have official markers in public places that are easier to observe.

Jim noted that Aquinnah has an added regulatory layer, since the entire town is a District of Critical Planning Concern. Everything there essentially requires a special permit. Ginny said that would never happen in West Tisbury. Bill said that the Aquinnah DCPC has impacted the tax base there, and he again stressed the importance of educating the community to understand that investments now will help ensure a better world in the future.

Representatives discussed the All-Island Planning Board (AIPB), which formed a few years ago in regard to the Islandwide Housing Production Plans. The AIPB has been somewhat dormant in recent years. Dan further advocated for learning from the pandemic, which has shown the benefits of working together as an Island, since the coronavirus and climate change don't recognize town borders. He hoped the AIPB would regroup and continue working on climate change issues in the future.