

MVC Adaptation Master Plan Subcommittee (AMPC)

Stakeholder Listening Session #5: Planning Boards (Part 2)

June 24, 2020, on Zoom

AMPC members and MVC staff present: Alex Elvin, Christine Flynn, Meghan Gombos, Ben Robinson also Tisbury planning board), Richard Toole, Kate Warner

Planning board members and administrators present: Bill Cleary (Oak Bluffs), Doug Finn (Edgartown), Pat Harris (Tisbury), Elaine Miller (Tisbury), Donna Paulnock (West Tisbury conservation committee and climate advisory committee), Jane Rossi (West Tisbury)

This listening session was a follow-up to the one on April 30, during which planning board representatives identified several challenges and opportunities related to climate change adaptation on the Island. The discussion on April 30 had focused on regional collaboration, regulations and policies, and the motivation of Island residents in general. The representatives had also requested a list of follow-up questions in writing that they could discuss with their boards, and to schedule a second listening session with the AMPC.

Key concerns and ideas

REGIONAL PLANNING

- Tisbury and Oak Bluffs in particular should collaborate with other Island towns on adaptation, and vice versa, since they are the gateways to the Island
- Towns must be able to work effectively both on their own and regionally
- Regional discussions about adaptation should include Island builders, architects, and engineers
- Planning boards could play a bigger role in coordinating the regional development of the VTA, including the location of charging infrastructure
- Support from boards of selectmen is vital to regional planning initiatives
- The financial implications of adaptation (and inaction) should be developed as soon as possible
- Creating a more resilient Island will require both failures and successes along the way

ZONING AND REGULATION

- Zoning bylaws should be unified across the Island so that developers don't simply go where the regulations are more relaxed
- A regional approach to development in the shore zone might be better pursued as an MVC regulation (DCPC or DRI referral)
- Zoning changes would likely need to involve conservation commissions as well as planning boards

OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATION

- The main challenge is not to get people to prioritize ecology over profit, but to integrate the profit motive with adaptation and environmental goals
- Importance of long-term education, including by way of school curriculums
- Voters may support regional initiatives in theory, but then back down when faced with the actual decision and financial implications
- Town officials have a responsibility to give voice even to a small minority
- Town-wide property risk assessments could be published annually with the tax assessments

Notable statements

“Building a big, pretty house and saying, ‘I have insurance if anything happens’ is not a good way to go.” – Jane Rossi

“One structure falling into the ocean in one town does affect the whole Island. If we manage that regionally, that is a stronger position.” – Ben Robinson

“Moving a tanker is a 10-mile process to take a left turn. Whereas on a jet ski you can do it in 10 seconds.” – Doug Finn on the benefits of smaller leadership teams

Summary of discussion

As with the listening session on April 30, the June 24 session focused largely on the topic of regional collaboration. Elaine Miller of Tisbury pointed out that adaptation issues addressed in Tisbury and Oak Bluffs in particular will benefit the entire Island, since those are the two gateway towns. She argued that it would be inefficient for other towns not to work with Tisbury and Oak Bluffs in their adaptation planning, and vice versa.

Ben Robinson supported the idea of each town having a separate climate advisory committee, since towns need to work both regionally and on their own. Kate Warner agreed there is value in the town-by-town approach, since certain issues are unique to each town. However, she argued that issues related to planning boards, conservation commissions, and climate advisory groups should be dealt with on a regional basis. She added that every town has an energy committee, which could potentially double as a climate advisory committee, as it does Aquinnah.

Commenting on the minutes of the April 30 meeting, Elaine said regional discussions should include Island builders, architects, and engineers, who have contact with buyers and homeowners. She disagreed that the main challenge is to get people to prioritize ecology over profit, arguing instead that the main challenge is to integrate the profit motive with adaptation and environmental goals. Alex Elvin said the proposed Vineyard adaptation plan will involve the identification of adaptation co-benefits. Richard Toole recommended that those numbers be developed as soon as possible, including the cost of inaction. He pointed to the Squibnocket causeway project in Chilmark as an example of

adaptation that has benefited the tax base, since it preserved access to several large properties. Christine Flynn emphasized the importance of clearly laying out the long-term financial implications of adaptation.

On the topic of zoning and real estate, Elaine encouraged a unified approach among the towns, so that buyers and developers don't simply go where the regulations are more relaxed. She added that as a real estate agent, she has told clients who can't conform to a town's historic district regulations, for example, that they are probably looking in the wrong place.

Ben noted the VTA's plans to transition its fleet to electric busses and install electric infrastructure, a regional project that was recently stalled by the concerns of abutters in Edgartown. He suggested that planning boards could play a bigger role in coordinating the regional development of the VTA, including where the proposed charging infrastructure is located. Elaine, who serves on the VTA board, said the proposal for a charging station in Edgartown had been approved by town boards, and it was only two abutters who still had concerns. Doug Finn countered that the Edgartown planning board had not reviewed the project, and the 2020 town meeting was the first time it had been presented to the broader public. He saw that as a reminder that many projects still require approval by voters, who in this case sided with the abutters. Elaine asked at what point do you decide that a project serves the greater good, and Doug responded that town officials have a responsibility to give voice even to a small minority. Moving forward, Ben suggested that all the planning boards be updated on the VTA's long-term plans.

Representatives were asked how best to create a sense of unity among the towns. Elaine recalled her involvement in efforts several years ago to establish an Island housing bank, which she said had Islandwide support, but then failed at town meetings. She said the reason was that people backed down when faced with the actual decision and financial implications.

On the other hand, Christine Flynn highlighted two multi-board planning projects in Oak Bluffs that are moving forward — a \$2.7 million streetscape improvement project, and stormwater improvements along Sunset Lake. She also emphasized that voter education and support are critical for climate change adaptation, in part because zoning bylaw amendments require a 2/3 majority vote at town meeting. She and others acknowledged that creating a more resilient Island will require both failures and successes along the way.

The conversation turned to the topic of zoning bylaws, which are written differently in each town. In terms of a regional approach to zoning, Ben suggested focusing on land use around the shorelines, which will likely see the greatest impacts. That approach would also likely involve the conservation commissions. Doug stressed that coordinating zoning bylaws among multiple towns would be difficult since they don't necessarily share the same definitions, and different conservation commissions may have different priorities. He suggested that such a regional approach might be better handled by the MVC, for instance by requiring DRI referral for all development in the shore zone. In that case, he said planning boards would be open to providing input and helping develop the rules and guidelines. He argued that the MVC approach could also happen more quickly.

Elaine said there are at least two or three houses along the south shore that are designed to be moved inland over time.

In response to the question of what information or messages could help advance the adaptation planning project at the town level, Doug suggested clearly communicating the intention, with concrete goals and ways for boards to get involved. Richard Toole recommended presenting a list of vulnerabilities to each town board of selectmen, whose support is vital. Elaine emphasized the importance of long-term education, including by way of school curriculums. Ben stressed the importance of developing adaptation strategies that lay out each town board's responsibilities and how the different boards interact. Jane Rossi suggested looking at examples of adaptation in other coastal towns.

Richard argued that residential development on the Island will continue due to the investment appeal, although Elaine argued that the appeal had more to do with a sense of personal safety. She recalled that even after 9/11, Island property sales remained high. Richard added that the Covid-19 pandemic has likely driven many buyers to retire to the Vineyard sooner than planned.

Elaine emphasized the importance of educating buyers about the vulnerability of certain properties, such as through a property risk assessment that could be published annually with the tax assessments. Ben noted that upcoming studies funded by the Woods Hole Research Center and Office of Coastal Zone Management will provide detailed information about vulnerable areas along the shore.