

MVC Adaptation Master Plan Subcommittee (AMPC)

Stakeholder Listening Session #6: Realtors (preliminary)

August 2, 2020, on Zoom

AMPC members and MVC staff present: Liz Durkee, Alex Elvin, Tristan Israel, Peter Neilley, Ben Robinson

Realtors present: Courtney Marek, Elaine Miller

Key points

- Clients may be concerned about erosion and flooding, but are generally not thinking about climate change or its long-term impacts.
- Realtors would be reluctant to frame properties in a negative light and risk losing sales.
- The short-term rental community might not be concerned about climate change until an extreme or disruptive event occurs.
- The prices of waterfront homes on the Vineyard have apparently not been affected by climate change.
- Realtors may be willing to participate in a program where visitors receive a decal or other acknowledgment that they participate in activities that help the Island.
- Elaine saw adaptation as more of an issue for builders, engineers, and others whose work will trickle down to real estate agents.
- Courtney advised that buy-in from realtors should be pursued with an understanding that their mission is to protect the rights of private property owners. A positive approach would be more effective.

Notable statements

“The [regulatory] information that we share with potential buyers is very thorough. If we talk to people who balk at those things, we recommend they not consider the Island.” – Elaine Miller

“To get their attention, it is the little pieces, like the bottle ban — things they can relate to and do simply with a little thought to help.” – Courtney Marek

“Philosophically, I think A but B is where we are at. How can those ideas meet? How do you get us to buy in if it potentially changes our business?” – Courtney Marek

“Your work is with builders, engineers, zoning boards, etc. That will trickle down to us and we will be your crusaders — but it won’t trickle up from us.”

“People won’t want to deal with us if we are saying their properties are in danger.” – Elaine Miller

Summary of discussion

Real estate activity on the Island is booming as a result of Covid-19, since many people see the Island as a safe haven. (Anecdotally, many of the new homeowners are in their 50s or younger, with families, and move here to establish “secondary primary homes.”) Elaine Miller suggested that more realtors will be available for a listening session in October or November.

The two realtors present for this listening session agreed that while real estate clients are often concerned about erosion and flooding, they are generally not thinking about climate change per se, or the long-term impacts. They also agreed that more education is needed in terms of how climate impacts will affect properties. At the same time, realtors would be reluctant to frame properties in a negative light and risk losing sales. Courtney added that while many realtors tend to research their properties extensively, most do not.

Liz Durkee explained that the AMPC’s goal is to pursue innovative adaptation strategies that may actually increase the value of land. Along those lines, Elaine said the decision to place certain properties in conservation, for example, would be made at the local or state level, and that realtors would only enter the picture later on. She added that realtors would likely embrace Islandwide education that comes from the MVC, for example, but she suggested that it focus more on engineers, architects, and builders who are on the front lines.

Peter Neilley argued that realtors are on the front lines, at least for the seasonal and temporary housing markets. He noted the increasing vulnerability to weather events, about which the visitor community is not well educated, and wondered if realtors would be willing to help promote educational materials designed for visitors. Courtney argued that the short-term community would only be concerned once an extreme or disruptive event occurs.

Elaine recalled the role that realtors played in educating people about the short-term rental tax, which she said did not ruin the local market, but she agreed with Courtney that seasonal renters would not be concerned until a disaster actually happens. Courtney added that as renters they would be less interested in adaptation/preparation than people who own properties.

Courtney said the prices of waterfront homes on the Vineyard have so far not been affected by climate change. Elaine recalled one example on Edgartown Harbor where the price decreased, and the relocation of the Schifter house on Chappaquiddick in 2013. She added that in her 27 years in real estate, her clients have almost never expressed concern about climate change, and that Massachusetts has less of a history of severe storms than places like Florida or the Carolinas, so people here are not so attuned to the dangers.

Ben pointed out that in addition to planning for storms and other emergencies, adaptation involves everyday decisions such what car to bring to the Island, how and where to shop local, and other decisions that could enhance people’s vacations, and where realtors could play a role in educating their clients, including how those activities support resilience. Elaine agreed that visitors do generally

value activities specific to the Island, and Courtney noted the value of educating clients as to how their smaller decisions can benefit the Island.

Elaine floated an idea for a program where visitors can get a decal or some kind of acknowledgment that they participate in activities that help the Island, such as shopping locally. She suggested that such a program would be more palatable to realtors than preaching doom and gloom, and that realtors could help register their clients for the program.

Neither Elaine nor Courtney felt they could comment on what they would like to see in the Island Climate Adaptation Plan. Courtney acknowledged that her personal concerns about climate change did not necessarily align with the concerns of her profession, and she wondered how those differing concerns could be met. Ben pointed out that people need to know that climate change will most likely affect their business, with or without an adaptation plan. He said the goal for the plan is to get ahead of the curve and play more of a role in deciding our future. He added that discussions about adaptation should continue even when they are difficult, such as with managed retreat.

Tristan Israel noted that clients who buy property near the water are generally told what rules and regulations apply, and that type of education spills over into the real estate sector. Elaine said realtors indeed share that information with clients, and if clients balk at the rules, realtors may recommend that they consider not buying on the Island. Elaine again argued that adaptation is more of an issue for builders, engineers, and others whose work will trickle down to real estate agents, who will in turn carry it forward. But she didn't see adaptation "trickling up" from the realtors.

On the topic of doom and gloom, Peter argued that adaptation does not have to present a negative story, especially if a community is ahead of the curve. He said adaptation could in fact drive real estate sales by demonstrating that the Island has developed an approach that increases resilience to climate impacts over the next century. Looking ahead, Courtney advised that buy-in from the real-estate sector should be pursued with an understanding that the mission of realtors is to protect the rights of private property owners. She agreed that a positive approach would be more effective.

Elaine suggested that Courtney talk with her executive director at Sandpiper Realty, and possibly come back to the AMPC with information about how realtors are addressing climate change on the Cape.