

Built Environment Work Group – Kick-Off Meeting

Minutes December 3, 2007, 7:00 p.m., MVC Offices

Present: Henry Stephenson (Island Plan Steering Committee), Ann Barry, Christina Brown, Peter Cabana, Greg Ehrman, Angie Frances, Dan Greenbaum, Ken Maclean, Pat Manning, Bruce MacNelly, Stephanie Mashek, James Moffatt, Andrew Nanan, Richard Toole,

Staff: Mark London, Chris Seidel, Christine Flynn, Bill Veno, Ed O'Connell, Paul Foley

1. Welcome

Henry Stephenson, member of the Island Plan Steering Committee and liaison to the Built Environment Work Group, welcomed the participants to the first meeting of the Built Environment Work Group.

2. Background

Mark London gave a PowerPoint presentation outlining the purpose and status of the Island Plan, and giving some background information about the built environment including an animated dot map showing construction over time and photos illustrating various issues that we might want to deal with.

3. What is the Built Environment?

The group brainstormed as to what constitutes the built environment. In general, it was anything that "didn't grow there". Anything that is man-made.

- Buildings: public, commercial, industrial (or lack thereof), private homes
- Other Structures: trailers, fences, mailboxes, wind turbines, solar panels, temporary structures such as storage pods and dumpsters,
- Roads and Related Elements: Roads, sidewalks, curbing, public signage (why do we have these new bright reflecting street signs?), utility poles (why are there reflectors on every second tree or pole?), guardrails;
- Parking lots
- Landscape Altered by Man: parks, fields, farms, golf courses, tennis courts, clearing of natural landscaping around construction ("paving with grass"), fences,
- Infrastructure : or lack thereof.
- Lighting: both the poles and lights, and the general issue of light and its impact on the night sky.
- Waterfronts and Harbors: piers, docks, armoring, access;
- Disturbed Areas: Landfills, construction pits, junkyards;
- Scenic Values: roadway viewsheds, views from public waters.

4. Discussion of Several Key Questions

The participants then split into four groups and brainstormed about four specific issues. Subsequently, they reported back to the whole group as follows. Note that comments represent individual opinions and not necessarily the group.

A. Can we do a better job protecting the resources and character of historic areas and of neighborhoods?

Are present historic districts too large or too small? Do they operate effectively? Would it be useful to create Neighborhood Conservation Districts, which would provide more limited protection for certain areas?

- The current historic districts are too small. Enlarge the existing ones and establish new ones to cover all historic areas. Define clear criteria.
- It would be useful to have some consistency across the Island for the determination (e.g. based on age and location) and administration of historic districts. This would help with owner awareness.
- We need to consider historic buildings outside of protected districts. Should they be protected neighborhood by neighborhood, or building by building.
- We need to enforce policies.
- It is important to maintain the character and vitality of town centers. How should we balance tourists' versus locals' needs? What is the best location and size for parking?. The Oak Bluffs B1 town center should be treated as a downtown neighborhood.
- We should deal with home businesses, they can be eyesores, detriments to neighborhood character.

B. How can we improve areas that are presently problematic or have opportunity for improvement?

What are these transition areas? What can be done to articulate a community vision for their future? From a built environment perspective, what are the key concerns about the redevelopment of these areas?

- These areas, including those that are more opportunities than problems, include: Upper State Road (Tisbury), Upper Main Street / Triangle (Edgartown), West Tisbury Business District (opportunity), the Edgartown – Vineyard Haven Road, Tashmoor Overlook, Beetlebung Corner; Goodale Pit and other disturbed land, sprawl areas
- Present problems in some areas are: visual blight lack of appropriate infrastructure and zoning, congestion, inefficiency, the ZBA process is faulty
- It would be useful to draw up specific area plans for each of these areas. This could be done by town planning boards with the MVC.
- Actions should then include: preparing design guidelines, revising zoning (setbacks, 3D, fences), putting in capital investments and infrastructure improvements. It could involve the

Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) from open space preservation areas and creation of a density bank.

- A challenge is that there is often public resistance to infill. Infill can be disruptive sometimes. Infill and sprawl are both happening; they need to be balanced.

C. How can we ensure that buildings are located and designed to harmonize with their context (villages, streetscapes, rural areas)?

In what areas are we most concerned about the impact of building design? What features are of concern? What should the objectives be? How might they be achieved?

- We should take most care in historic districts, village centers, and public vistas including highly visible roads. The public face is more critical than the backs. In other areas, we should allow architecture to evolve into 21st Century.
- Design guidelines should be used to ensure that the character of important areas and roads are protected, but they should not be so prescriptive as to squelch creativity. (People felt that the system on Nantucket, where even new subdivisions must exactly follow the historic design details, goes to far. On the other hand, knowing that nothing inappropriate can be built does protect the environment and property values.)
- A priority is to make sure that new buildings fit into their context, whether this is the street, the landscape, the historic district, the town, or the whole Island. This is generally more a matter of siting, relationship to street (setback, orientation), scale, and massing, rather than enforcing a single style. What is appropriate in one town may not be in another one; for example, a formal symmetrical entrance is desirable in Edgartown and inappropriate in Chilmark.
- A key is to analyze what is special about each area, and then use education to make people sensitive to their context. It would be useful to publish a pamphlet, like *Building with Nantucket in Mind*, but better.
- Zoning deals with the overall concerns such as building size and location, but not the design specifics. These are best dealt with by some process of project design review.

D. Can new buildings be more environmentally sound?

What aspects of building design could be improved for environmental concerns? How could this be done?

- Incentivize good environmental design (see regulatory). justify cost?
- Build smaller (size matters).
- Encourage renovation and rehabilitation. Upgrade rather than tear down.
- Focus on higher density as positive.
- Encourage mixed-use development.
- Siting (e.g. cluster development) and context are important. Promote walkability by favoring building in proximity to downtown.

- Focus on buildings that allow a greener lifestyle, not just the building itself.
- LEED certification could be a good tool, especially the part that relates to energy. Possibly create an Energy Code, or make changes to the Building Code.
- There are concerns about the cost as an impediment to implementation.

6. Discussion

Finally, there was a general discussion of the above items and of the next steps.

- The key is identifying the character of different areas, and educating people so they know what they are buying into.
- We need to acknowledge that, with the high real estate costs, some people are going to want to maximize the use of their property with additions and with new construction that go to the limits of the zoning regulations, whether or not it fits into the neighborhood.
- It was suggested that incentives, such as tax credits, could be offered to encourage people to build houses that fit with their context. However, the concern was raised that this means that someone else will have to pay that person's share of the Town's operating budget. The idea of incentives sounds great, however if it means that year-round people with limited incomes have to pay higher taxes (so that the schoolteachers and policemen still get paid) to make up for the tax break that a multi-millionaire got to not build an inappropriate building. Using zoning and a design review process could be less expensive and fairer. On the other hand, regulations might lead to court cases, which could also cost the Town for legal fees.
- An incentive would be to process an application faster, such as making greenbuilding as-of-right. Builders are anxious to get to market quickly, and might make certain decisions if this would avoid a long review process. We should look into how Chicago incentivizes greenbuilding.
- Most people want to do the right thing; they just don't know what it is. A positive approach is preferable.
- If we want smaller houses, we could think about allowing two small houses instead of one big one on a lot.
- The B1 district in Oak Bluffs is 11 out of 500 acres. How can we keep the commercial focus in the heart of town? It still has the post office, a grocery store, several year-round businesses; and 1000-1500 people can walk to it.

Minutes prepared by Mark London.