This Discussion Paper is a work-in-progress based on previous plans, on results of forums and surveys, and on the ongoing efforts of the Built Environment Work Group. Please see the last page for how you can join this conversation.

How Can We Maintain the Vineyard's Distinct Character?

The overall goal is to preserve the distinct character of Martha's Vineyard and promote environmentally sound new construction.

THE VINEYARD'S DISTINCT CHARACTER: Martha's Vineyard's built environment is among the most remarkable in the country and is an important part of the scenic beauty at the heart of the Island's character, identity, and visitor-based economy.

It is made up of historic town and village centers, each with its own distinct character such as the white clapboard public buildings and grand residences of Edgartown, the fanciful multi-colored Victorian cottages in Oak Bluffs, and the fishing shacks of Menemsha. These are surrounded by traditional neighborhoods and linked by rural roads lined with stone walls and dotted by roadside farm houses.

The oldest parts of Vineyard towns are models of what would now be called "smart growth", with compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, human-scale buildings set quite close together. In the 1970s, most Island towns adopted zoning bylaws – many based on standard models from elsewhere – which required the separation of uses and larger lot sizes and setbacks. This led to the creation of low density, car-oriented, suburban and rural subdivisions which we might now characterize as "sprawl". Ironically, these regulations would make it impossible to build most of the areas we treasure the most.

Recent construction usually follows traditional local forms (typically a combination of several simple volumes with steeply sloping roofs) and materials (typically white siding in some towns, cedar shingles elsewhere). However, there are some buildings, especially in suburbs, with different size, style and materials.
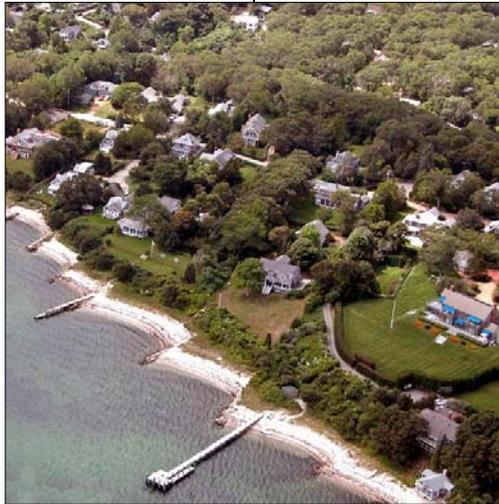
THE THREAT: Several factors now threaten this unique, coherent, high-quality built environment. Skyrocketing real estate costs lead some people to maximize use of their property by demolishing older buildings and erecting buildings with that go to the limits of zoning regulations, and are too big or otherwise don't fit into their surroundings.

Just a few poorly designed buildings in highly visible locations can seriously undermine the Island's character.

We need more pro-active tools to preserve the Vineyard's distinct character and ensure that environmental concerns are respected.

- Zoning: Revisions to regulations should ensure that desirable building practices are allowed, and prohibit clearly inappropriate proposals. Zoning work best for issues that can be quantified, such as setbacks or energy consumption.
- Design Review: Qualitative design issues are best approached with a process of individual project review.
- Education: In many cases, people want to do the right thing, if these issues were better understood.
- Incentives: Incentives can encourage sound practices.

The Built Environment Work Group looked at:
- Historic Resources: The areas, buildings, and spaces with cultural value to the community,
- Community Character: The physical character of neighborhoods and the Island,
- Green Building: Environmental issues related to buildings,
- Opportunity Areas: Selected locations where redevelopment using new land use and building approaches might be appropriate.

The following key directions have emerged from the inquiries of the Built Environment Work Group.

B1. *Better protect historic resources – such as culturally significant buildings, streetscapes, and areas – and ensure that new development is compatible.*

There are about 2000 buildings more than 100 years old, and another 1500 built up to the end of World War II. Of these, about 930 are located in the Island's six designated Historic Districts (which cover 502 acres). Another 1900 are concentrated in Historic Areas (about 2000 acres for the Island) and Established Neighborhoods (about 500 acres).

Often zoning is not aligned to historic patterns, permitting excessively large buildings or requiring excessively large setbacks.

To improve protection of historic resources, we should identify and preserve the significant features of historic areas, streetscapes, public spaces, structures, uses, artifacts, and other resources. We should also ensure that new additions to historic structures and new infill buildings in historic areas harmonize with the defining characteristics of the existing buildings and areas.

The Built Environment Work Group identified Historic Areas (red) and Established Neighborhoods (pink), shown here for Vineyard Haven.

B2. *Protect general community character by ensuring that buildings fit into their context, especially from the public way, while allowing creativity and flexibility.*

In all parts of the Island, even outside historic areas, we should maintain general neighborhood and Island character. This is especially important as seen from major roads, vistas, ponds and the ocean, and is also a concern within neighborhoods. This can be done by ensuring that new construction is compatible with the character of neighborhoods, streetscapes, and the Vineyard as a whole. In many natural areas, this means limiting the visual presence of new development.

To do this, we should identify visually critical areas and carefully manage building within them. We should also look to zoning to avoid very inappropriate projects, and use awareness to encourage people to make new buildings harmonious. We should also require or encourage appropriate landscaping.
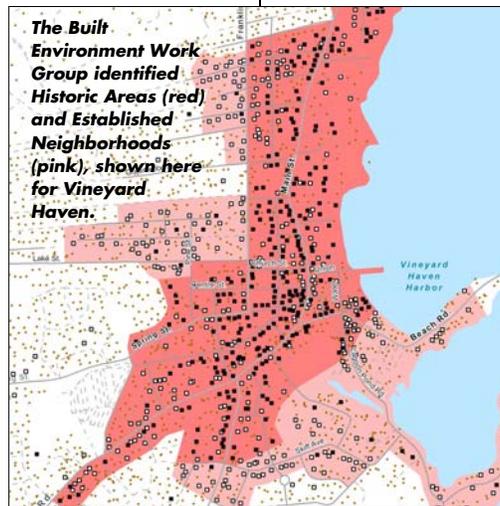
B3. *Encourage use of environmentally sound building "green-building" techniques and minimize the negative environmental impacts of building.*

Given the Island's particular transportation constraints, it is especially important to increase the efficiency with which buildings use resources — energy, water, and materials — while reducing building impacts on human health and the environment. This can be done through better siting, design, construction, operation, maintenance, and removal — the complete building life cycle. We should also be concerned about other building impacts on its surrounding area, such as light pollution and noise, and should optimize the impacts of renewable energy projects by looking at their impact on scenic values and historic resources.

Though there is great interest in green building on the Vineyard, there are presently no regulations or incentives to actually make it happen. In addition to energy-related issues (discussed by the Energy & Waste Work Group) there is a wide variety of things we could do, such as minimizing demolition of existing buildings or scrapping of building materials, using environmentally sound building practices, using green building materials (reused, reusable, non-toxic), and ensuring the highest indoor air quality.

B4. *Redevelop "opportunity areas" – presently problematic areas – to improve the quality of the physical environment, to make them work more efficiently, and possibly to incorporate mixed-use, compact development.*

There are a few areas of the Island where there could be substantial change over the next generation, which could substantially and positively modify its character. These areas include some of the Island's post-war commercial areas, landfills, and disturbed areas.

These areas give us the opportunity to concentrate mixed use, compact development as an alternative to sprawling, car-oriented growth in more environmentally or historically sensitive areas. Increased density could be tied into reduction in density in environmentally sensitive areas, and/or be reserved for affordable or elderly housing.

PROMISING INITIATIVES

The following are some of the most promising specific initiatives that have emerged. If they prove feasible and win support, they could get underway without waiting for other parts of the plan.

Set up project review processes in roadside corridors, scenic vistas and views from ponds and the ocean. *(P30)*

We can better protect Visually Critical Areas by identifying major roadside corridors, scenic vistas, and views from public open spaces, ponds and the ocean; by analyzing their defining characteristics and publishing guidelines for their protection; and by setting up a design approval process (e.g. special permit) for construction in these areas.

We should revise the Island Road DCPC to better control fencing, parking, and vegetation along designated roads (e.g no-cut zones and/or allowing only open fencing close to road) and set new building well back from the road, if possible. A related effort is to set up municipal street tree programs to plant and maintain trees along public roads; and to offer advice and assistance to help people increase vegetation in front of development along rural roads.

Set up a design review process for high-impact buildings based on size or other criteria. *(P31)*

We should set up a design review process for high-impact buildings such as those larger than a specific size, which could vary by neighborhood. The process could involve requiring a special permit or MVC review.

Revise zoning dimensional requirements in neighborhoods to conform to existing character. *(P32)*

We should revise zoning regulations (setbacks, building heights, etc.) in neighborhoods to bring them into general conformity with the existing pattern, thereby preventing the most inappropriate new development.

Produce a publication for property owners and building designers on what defines the Vineyard's distinct built environment and how to protect it, on historic areas, and on green building. *(P33)*

We should publish a guidebook on *Building the Vineyard Way* including the special features of each historic area, what defines Visually Critical Areas, and the general character of Vineyard buildings, roadscapes, public spaces and landscaping. It should include guidelines about how protect existing buildings and features, and how new development can fit in. as well as information about green building and how to reduce environmental impacts including dark-sky compliant lighting.

Set energy/green-building standards for new construction. *(P34)*

We should require Energy Star certification on all new construction or implement a custom green-building code for the Island (e.g. VineyardBuild). We could require LEED certification for major projects and, as it becomes more affordable and accessible, require it for all building projects.

Enlarge historic districts to protect all historic areas. *(P35)*

We should enlarge historic districts and create new ones to protect all historic areas the 5% of the Vineyard with concentrations of pre-World-War-II buildings) including buildings, streetscapes and public spaces. In historic districts, we should analyze the defining characteristics of each area, publish guidelines for preservation and harmonious new construction, and revise zoning in historic areas to conform to historic patterns.

Outline redevelopment programs for Opportunity Areas. *(P36)*

For each Opportunity Area, we should determine the basic uses and concept, prepare an urban design plan, revise zoning regulations to conform to the plan, make public improvements, and encourage private development.

NEXT STEPS

You are invited to give your comments!

This fall, the Work Group will revise this document based in part on the feedback received during the summer. It plans to focus its efforts looking at the feasibility of Promising Initiatives identifying what entities could implement them.

You can be part of this effort by joining more than 500 Vineyarders who are in the Network of Planning Advisors or have joined Work Groups on topics of interest to them.

THE ISLAND PLAN

The Island Plan is charting a course to the kind of future that the Vineyard community wants and is outlining a series of actions to help us navigate that course. It breaks new ground while incorporating the best lessons of the present and the past. It is not something to wait for, but something to work with, now and in the future.

The planning process began in 2006. The summer of 2008 is time for the second mid-course correction, to get feedback from the broader community on the ongoing work of the Steering Committee and Work Groups.

Presently, there are seven other Work Groups: Energy & Waste, Housing, Livelihood & Commerce, Natural Environment, Social Environment, Transportation, and Water Resources.

The Steering Committee is coordinating the overall effort, and is outlining options with respect to Development and Growth.

USEFUL RESOURCES

The following document is available on the website and from the MVC.

- **Built Environment Work Group – Synthesis:** An expanded version of this Discussion Paper. The heftier working document is regularly updated as new information is obtained.

GET INVOLVED

PARTICIPATE IN THESE FORUMS!

All forums are at 7:30 pm

- **Transportation**
  Monday, July 14 Katharine Cornell Theatre, Tisbury
- **Built Environment**
  Monday, August 4 Union Chapel, Oak Bluffs
- **Development & Growth**
  Wednesday, August 27 Agricultural Hall, West Tisbury

The Island Plan is a community effort to confront the issues that will shape our future. Here are some of the ways you can join in.

- **FORUMS:** Come to the Built Environment Forum on August 4. There will also be a forum on Transportation, as well as a forum dealing with Development and Growth on August 27.
- **WEBSITE:** The Island Plan website offers you many ways to give your input or to find more useful information including:
  - A feedback survey about these proposals,
  - A survey about Development and Growth.
  - Discussion papers about the other topics,
  - A way to join the Network of Planning Advisors and Work Groups, or to get on the mailing list,
  - Background documents, results of forums and surveys, meeting minutes, etc.

  The same information is available in Island public libraries or directly from the MVC.

The Chair of the Built Environment Work Group is Henry Stephenson The Work Group currently has 88 members. The primary staff contact for the Built Environment Work Group is Mark London 508-693-3453 ext 11 or london@mvcommission.org

The Island Plan is an initiative of, and is coordinated by, the Martha's Vineyard Commission.