RE: Support for DCPC Special Ways Designation

Dear Commissioners,

The Vineyard Conservation Society (VCS) is a local, member-supported non-profit land conservation and environmental advocacy organization working since 1965 to preserve the natural resources and community character of the Island. Please accept this testimony in support of the Special Ways DCPC nomination from the Tisbury Planning Board.

Tisbury’s Open Space Plan, adopted in 1997, recommended seeking such designation from the MVC for the Town’s ancient ways, including Red Coat Hill Road and Shubael Weeks Road (see excerpt below). The Planning Board deserves much credit for bringing this effort close to fruition. We urge your unanimous vote to designate.

The two Special Ways under consideration are historically significant, and figure prominently in the open space planning efforts across the region. They fit the description of ways intended for protection under the Island Road DCPC, and we are fortunate to have this opportunity to preserve them.

In many communities, similar old ways have been lost through encroachment and/or lack of use. Special Way designation and the associated guidelines will protect against deterioration, retain their functionality as connectors between designated conservation lands, and safeguard the visual experience of travel along our system of secondary paths and ways.

Thank you for the opportunity to voice support for this unique open space resource.

Sincerely,

Brendan O’Neill
Executive Director

From the Tisbury Open Space Plan:

Ancient ways represent a landscape feature of great historical, scenic and recreational value to the town. A concerted effort to safeguard ancient ways is therefore a priority, as this resource is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of development and change. These ways offer an alternative to the automobile for walkers, equestrians and cyclists... and can serve as green-belt connectors between conserved open spaces. Examples include Red Coat Hill Road and Shubael Weeks Road.
AN ANCIENT WAY AND GENERAL GREY

On September 10, 1778, 47 warships and 4,333 British troops under the command of General Sir Charles Grey anchored in Holmes Hole (Vineyard Haven) Harbor. Over the course of the next four days, as one of the expeditionary force Brigadiers wrote, they:

caryed off and destroyed all the corn and Roots two miles around [the] Harbour; Dug up the Ground everywhere to search for goods the people hid; even so Curious were they in searching as to Disturb the ashes of the Dead.

Tradition holds that the high ground west of Tashmoo was visited by Grey’s Raiders, thus its name: Red Coat Hill. The ancient byway which today traverses this rolling, wooded terrain is currently the focus of an effort involving VCS, the other Wakeman Conservation Center organizations and the Martha’s Vineyard Land Bank to protect this historic road and the rights of the public to travel over it.

Red Coat Hill Road is probably a remnant of the old route to the settlement at Onokemmy Bay, or Lambert’s Cove. That once flourishing community boasted of three wharves before Vineyard Haven had any, two schools, several stores, salt works, smokehouses, a brick kiln, a tannery, a large lumber yard, commercial fish weirs, cranberry bogs, even a ferry service to Woods Hole!

Prior to colonial settlement, this region called Chikamaug (anglicized: “Chickemoo,” from the Algonquian term for weir fishing station), supported a sizable population and a complex system of native trails. Red Coat Hill Road was based on these earlier Chickemoo trails.

Today, this special ancient way serves as a walking trail connector between two of the Land Bank’s major conservation land holdings. A network of other intact old ways eventually links the hiker or horseback rider with the 22 acres of conservation-protected public trails at the Wakeman Center. In the past, VCS has sponsored guided walks along these ancient ways as part of our monthly walks program.

Along with Wakeman Center colleagues Sheriff’s Meadow Foundation, Vineyard Open Land Foundation, Trustees of Reservations and Martha’s Vineyard Garden Club, VCS has asked the Massachusetts Land Court for Intervenor or Amicus Curiae (“Friend of the Court”) status in upcoming land registration petitions in order to ascertain public rights of passage on the Red Coat Hill Road and another ancient way.

VCS intends to support the position of the Land Bank that these old ways represent a vanishing historical and open space resource, and that they should be reserved for public passive recreational use. A decision upholding those rights would be a valuable precedent which could help stem the rapid loss of ancient ways Island-wide.