

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Roundabout Reasoning Flawed, Circuitous

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I attended the Martha's Vineyard Commission hearing on Sept. 1 on the roundabout proposal for the Vineyard Haven-Edgartown Road intersection with Barnes and Airport Roads. As a longtime Island summer resident with occasional winters here, I have closely followed the work of the MVC, often with approval and admiration.

At the hearing, I was dismayed by the number of unquestioned assertions made by the traffic experts, the Oak Bluffs selectmen and the Oak Bluffs MVC members, invoking "safety" as their concern, with no mention of the ballooning cost of the project, its negative impact on the landscape, or an alternative solution to the intersection problem.

- **On procedure:** For 10 years a roundabout was considered a solution to the problem of the intersection but never came before the MVC for approval until this summer. If now, in 2011, it is a development of regional impact (DRI), why wasn't it one 10 years ago? Instead, during that long period, the MVC threw its own resources into planning this project with Oak Bluffs without ever insisting on a DRI referral, even though its own guidelines mandate one. The past expenditure by the MVC on planning and design with Oak Bluffs should not now be a rationale for approving the proposal, which has proceeded all this time without MVC approval. Instead, the MVC should wipe the slate clean of past actions or inactions and assess the project with a fresh eye.

- **On funding:** Nowhere in the MVC's enabling legislation does it say that the availability of state and federal funds for a proposal should prejudice the commission in its favor. Yet roundabout advocates cited the availability of funding as an overriding factor for project approval. Why? Does the MVC routinely consider the availability of financing when considering a DRI project put forward by a developer? It does not, which is as it should be, even when the "developer" is a member town or the state.

The cost of this project, well over \$1 million, has more than doubled since 2006 and comes at a time of great economic distress. Infrastructure projects, yes, but not for those of low priority, whose cost is totally out of proportion to their supposed benefits. An Oak Bluffs commissioner stated that the project will not affect taxpayers: "It will not use federal or state tax money, only gas tax revenue." Where does gas tax revenue come from?

- **On safety:** There was disagreement on how safe this roundabout will be, with one statement that it will guarantee there will be no fatal accidents. This is nonsense. Bad drivers are bad drivers, drunk drivers are drunk drivers, and a roundabout will not deter them any more than a light or a four-way stop would. The risk will never become zero, no matter how much is spent or what structural changes are made — how close to zero must we get before the intersection is deemed “safe?” The MVC must address the sensitive issue of cost versus safety before proceeding to a vote.
- **On traffic:** The contradiction between actual traffic counts and the project’s planning assumptions is stunning, with no imperative at all for such a radical solution. Actual traffic has decreased at the rate of about one per cent per year since 2006, but the project’s planning assumption is that traffic is increasing at one to one and a half per cent per year and will do so for the next 20 years. The MVC should reexamine these basic statistics — the roundabout is overkill, driven by wrong assumptions.
- **On landscape:** There was no discussion of the roundabout’s large impact on the adjacent landscape. The MVC is predicated on the premise that the Vineyard is unique in its culture and natural environment, which are worth preserving. Indeed, its mission is to be the guardian of this special place. How then can it approve this development? Our landscape is unique, with many canopies of trees over roads and beautiful, varied roadside vegetation. Airport Road at this intersection, with oak trees meeting above it, is a quintessential down-Island landscape, a “green tunnel.” The roundabout, with its brutal bare swaths of concrete and macadam, its destruction of all trees in the surround, and its token landscape plantings, will change and suburbanize the very environment the MVC is charged with preserving.
- **The opposition:** Over 3,000 people from all six towns have signed petitions opposing the roundabout, indicating a problem which must be addressed in the DRI process. We were told that after roundabouts are built, people ultimately “like” them, but we heard many contradictory comments about public reactions. Indeed, the statistics showed that final approval ratings never go higher than 50 per cent.
- **An alternative solution:** A feasible alternative was not discussed: an unobtrusive “smart” traffic light, which could be programmed to mitigate the short summer crush and converted to a “red stop” for the rest of the year. The Oak Bluffs police chief stated that a light at the intersection would impede emergency vehicles, but vehicles can easily be equipped with devices that can immediately change a light sequence to clear an intersection. The assertion by one expert that a light system would cost as much as a roundabout is clearly not credible, and the MVC should obtain comparative costs before making its decision.

In summary, the cost of the roundabout has more than doubled since it was initially put forward, comes at a time of severe economic distress, and would use an enormous amount of taxpayer money with questionable effectiveness. It is

out of scale for its site and would have an adverse impact on the very landscape the MVC is charged with protecting. There exists a more flexible, less expensive, and less obtrusive alternative, a traffic light, easily adjusted to seasonal traffic needs. I respectfully suggest that the MVC, remembering its mission, go back to the drawing board and not accept this flawed roundabout project as a fait accompli.

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