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Martha's Vineyard Commission
P.O. Box 1447
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Dear MVC Commissioners and Staff:

The roundabout project should have been considered a development of regional impact from the beginning. It wasn't. Having been to two public hearings, read a pile of documents, listened to a lot of people, and done a little research on my own, I don't believe it's possible to retrofit the project with the studies and discussions that should have taken place before the Oak Bluffs board of selectmen approved it in September 2006.

The real question for Martha's Vineyard Commission, and for Martha's Vineyard, is not "Should there or should there not be a roundabout?" The real question is "What, if anything, should be done at the so-called blinker intersection?" When the roundabout idea was first raised -- in 2001, according to the MVC's timeline -- the intersection was a two-way stop and crashes were all too frequent. Because of the speeds involved, some of them caused serious bodily injury and vehicle damage. In 2001, a roundabout was a plausible solution.

With the institution of the four-way stop in 2003, the situation changed. The four-way stop "calmed" the traffic. Were the traffic-calming benefits of a roundabout any longer needed? Did the possible benefits of a roundabout justify the significant expense and environmental disruption of constructing one?

Your own statistics suggest that the answer to both questions is no. Set aside for the moment the national studies and percentage crash reduction stats and let's talk about this particular intersection. What *are* the crash statistics for this intersection since the four-way stop was established in 2003? How serious are these crashes? I'm told that the Oak Bluffs police department can't produce this information for all or most of the years since 2003. I'm also told that each jurisdiction is required to report crash statistics to the state Registry of Motor Vehicles every year. If the OBPD can't produce the numbers, perhaps the RMV can.

Having listened to GPI's representative and other speakers at the public hearings on Aug. 4 and Sept. 1, I infer that there are on average 4 or 5 crashes a year, and that nearly all of them are minor. Roundabout proponents promise a reduction of 60, 70, 80 percent: at our real-life intersection, that means the elimination of 3 or 4 accidents, probably fender-benders. Significantly, the fine print in the MVC's 2006 report indicates that few studies have looked at how roundabouts improve the safety record of four-way stops. When I asked Mr. Diaz of GPI if more studies had been done in the five years since, he waffled and then mumbled something that

sounded like "20 percent." If he meant a 20 percent reduction, that suggests that a roundabout might eliminate one crash a year.

One less crash a year -- in exchange for \$1.4 million, major disruption of the landscape, and very probably increased hazard to the many inexperienced bicyclists and moped riders who pass through that intersection every summer?

Does this make sense to you? To me it's totally absurd.

If there is a problem at the blinker intersection, it has less to do with safety than with traffic flow. The traffic backups take place in certain months, at certain times of day. Is a roundabout the best solution to this problem? Perhaps it is. Now that you've acknowledged that major changes at that intersection will have regional impact, it's up to you to explore the possibility and the alternatives. It's up to you to conduct the studies that will give us some idea of how a roundabout will affect congestion at either end of the Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road, where the backups can also be pretty daunting.

It's also up to you to conduct an environmental impact review. A formal environmental assessment or environmental impact statement may or may not be required because of the federal funds committed to this project, but even if it's not legally mandated, it would seem to be in keeping with the MVC's mission to protect the "natural, historical, ecological, scientific, [and] cultural" qualities of Martha's Vineyard. What impact is a roundabout likely to have on the island's character and desirability as a tourist destination? What do the island's year-round residents think of it?

An environmental impact review explores alternatives to the proposal. The obvious one here, and one that seems to have considerable local support, is a "smart" traffic light: one that can signal red-amber-green at peak times and peak seasons, and act as, in effect, a four-way stop the rest of the time. This alternative needs to be explored by people whose hearts aren't already set on a roundabout. Perhaps you could include in the study group some professional drivers -- truck drivers, bus drivers, cabbies -- and first-responder personnel. These Vineyarders seem to have woefully underconsulted in the process thus far.

The island as a whole has been underconsulted, or perhaps "underheard" is the better word. Given that there is no pressing need for immediate action at the blinker intersection, I believe this is the best reason to go back to the beginning: it's impossible to retrofit a project like this with public input, because public input must be allowed to shape and even scuttle the project. The first petition with 1,400 signatures of Vineyarders opposed to the roundabout, presented in 2004, may have helped delay the project. The second, with 1,200, presented in 2006, was ignored. The Oak Bluffs board of selectmen held all its public hearings in the summer -- never a good time to get the attention of working Vineyarders -- then at the September meeting when the momentous decision was made to proceed with the project only one member of the public (Trip Barnes) was allowed to speak.

At that point the project disappeared off the public radar screen, and most of us thought it had died -- Vineyarders are only now learning that it wasn't dead at all. Its reemergence this past

April took most of us by surprise. Finally, thanks to the West Tisbury board of selectmen's discretionary referral, the project was accepted as a DRI -- but once again the public hearings were held in the summer.

For those of us who did attend, the experience was sobering. The "public" hearings were orchestrated to minimize public input and maximize public impatience. On Aug. 4, we were sternly warned that the hearing was about the DRI referral, not about the merits of the roundabout -- then we were subjected to Mr. Diaz's interminable discourse on the merits of the roundabout. The same thing happened on Sept. 1: we got to listen to Mr. Diaz's very similar, even more interminable discourse, and no one seemed interested in taking up the question of whether the intersection is dangerous enough to warrant such a drastic "solution."

It's time to address that question from the perspective of the entire island, not just from the perspective of "the applicant" -- a town whose inability to govern itself does not inspire confidence.

Sincerely yours,

Susanna J. Sturgis

cc: Thomas Currier, project manager, MassDOT
State Rep. Tim Madden