Housing Work Group – Seasonal Workforce Housing
Meeting Notes of April 3, 2007, 4:30 pm, Martha’s Vineyard Commission

Present - Members: Richard Toole (Chair), Harvey Beth, Christina Brown, Candy DaRosa, Barbara Day, Sean Flynn, Nancy Gardella, Marc Hanover, Rob Kendall, Pat Manning, Sandy Ray, Jim Westervelt

Present – MVC Staff: Mark London, Christine Flynn

Meeting opened at 4:44 pm.

1. Welcome and Introductions:
Richard Toole welcomed the participants to the meeting. Mr. Toole introduced himself as a member of the Steering Committee and the Housing Work Group’s Liaison to the Steering Committee. Members then introduced themselves around the table.

Housing Work Group Core member Christina Brown gave some background information on the Summer Housing Workforce Taskforce, which was a subcommittee of Edgartown’s Planning Board, was formed in March 1999 to address summer housing for workers. The subcommittee was made up of members from the business community in addition to staff from the Chamber of Commerce and the MVC. It was mentioned that the group had worked for two years while having accomplished fundraising efforts, selecting a potential dormitory development sight behind the Hot Tin Roof at the Airport Business Park and creating architectural designs for the dormitories.

The Taskforce was given preliminary approval from the Airport Commissioners but when the Airport’s Master Plan was completed the site was designated for the County’s House of Corrections. It was noted that there is new interest to address the issue of seasonal workforce housing.

Participants then introduced themselves around the table.

2. Presentation on the Vineyard’s Seasonal Economic and Demographic Profile:
MVC’s Affordable Housing and Economic Development Planner Christine Flynn gave a presentation on the island’s seasonal demographic and economic profile. The following are some highlights:

- In 2000, the year-round populations for the Cape and the islands were the fastest growing communities in Massachusetts.
- Martha’s Vineyard’s year-round population growth within the last three decades has grown at an average annual growth rate of 3%. Since 2000, it is estimated the island’s population annual growth rate will be 1%.
• Seventy-five percent of the island’s total year-round population is concentrated equally at 25% in Edgartown, Oak Bluffs, and Tisbury. West Tisbury is closing in on its up-island counterparts at 19% of the island’s year-round population.

• It is estimated that the on an average day in July and August the summer population swells to 75,000 which is five times greater than the year-round population.

• The Vineyard’s Seasonal Housing Occupancy is second to Nantucket (60%) at 56% in the state. Thus at merit to the statement that the Vineyard does lack housing but rather lacks available stable, year-round housing for its residents.

• It is estimated that during the summer months there are 5,000 seasonal workers.

• The dominating year-round industry sectors for the island are retail, accommodation and food services, construction, in addition to other service sector industries. It was noted that the industries that experienced the highest fluctuation in employment figures during the summer were retail, accommodation and food service, arts, entertainment, & recreation, and transportation and warehousing.

• The makeup of the business community consist largely self-employed individuals in addition to small businesses. Over 70% of all businesses on Martha’s Vineyard employee between 1 – 4 workers. The US Census Economic Survey for Non-employer Statistics estimated that there are 3,300 self-employed workers in Dukes County.

• In 2003, the MVC in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce conducted a Business Survey. The following are some highlights:
  o 20% of those surveyed provide some form of employee housing,
  o 50% of those surveyed indicated that their year-round employees have stable housing,
  o 63% of those surveyed indicated that they would not be interested in participating in summer housing cooperative – It should be noted that 2/3 of those who responded were in the retail and real estate industry sectors.

3. Break-out Conversations:

A. Identify Needs for Seasonal Workforce Housing:

In addressing the housing needs for the seasonal workforce, it was important to identify a few key pieces of information. How has the high season for visitors changed? Second who is the seasonal worker? And which industry sectors have the greatest need for seasonal workers?

It was pointed out that the length of the visitor season has changed. It used to be that the summer season began on Memorial Day weekend and ended on Labor Day weekend. In the last five or ten years the season has extended well into the fall and winter seasons. Stores that used to be opened from May - September have slowly kept their doors open to Columbus Day in October. More recently retail and restaurant businesses along Circuit Avenue, for example, are open through Thanksgiving and even Christmas.

It was noted that the seasonal worker has also changed. Twenty years ago seasonal workers were American college students. Over time there was a shift to Irish and English students or workers because American colleges and universities changed the start of the school year to the second or third week of August. Some businesses target foreign universities that provide credits to students who have worked in tourism/hospitality related industry similar to a work-study exchange. It was also pointed out that there
are also those who are professional transient workers. Those individuals who are generally older -
twenties and thirties will work 6 months in Colorado and 6 months in the Vineyard. It was noted that
forcing living situations with individuals that work together could be very difficult.

It was suggested that retail and food and accommodations industry sectors had the greatest needs for
seasonal workers. It was pointed out that many of the restaurants and hotels offer some form of housing
to employees. It was agreed that a survey of the business community could help quantify the seasonal
workforce housing needs. It was suggested that the Chamber and MVC could collaborate on a follow
up Business Survey.

B. Identify barriers to addressing the seasonal housing needs and how is the issue
currently being addressed? What are other solutions that could be implemented?

Development barriers for year-round affordable housing such as land costs, availability of land, zoning,
permitting, funding, infrastructure water and wastewater, and NIMBY, are also applicable to
addressing seasonal workforce housing particularly for the development of dormitory housing.

- Just like year-round affordable housing there is inadequate supply of housing options for
seasonal workers. It was pointed out that seasonal workforce housing has a direct impact on
year-round residents who are forced to do the Island Shuffle.

- For those seasonal workers who do have some housing often times the houses are in violation of
health regulations for failed septic systems and overcrowding. It was asked how much slum
housing do we want to tolerate. If building inspectors and health agents shut down every
housing unit in violation of current codes that would displace both year-round and seasonal
workers.

- Businesses are struggling to find qualified and responsible workers even when businesses are
paying higher wages.

- Many businesses particularly in the restaurants and accommodation services provide some form
of housing for their workers - some employers either rent houses or have even purchased houses
to rent to their workers.

- It was noted that those employers are paying just under what a vacationer renting a home for a
month would pay. But to have the hire help during the summer is essential for the business to
survive. Some employers factor in housing costs for their worker as part of their business plan.

- It was pointed out that many employees in turn pay rent to their employers for the housing.
However it’s still an added cost to the business owner.

- It was asked how employers avoid the tenant landlord relationship? It was suggested that
instead of a lease, the housing is included with the job. Therefore if an employee is out of line
that employee not only loses the job but also the housing.

- It was agreed that an education and outreach campaign similar to the Dukes County Regional
Housing Authority’s Rental Conversion Program could be done in order to encourage private
residences to rent a spare bedroom. It was suggested that the Chamber or the Island Affordable
Housing Fund sponsor an out reach campaign but not get involved with matters of landlord and
tenant relations.
• It was suggested that older buildings such as a motel or municipal building be converted into dormitory housing. Or model Japanese Hotels for space efficiency for seasonal workers. It was noted that within the last five years the Vineyard has lost 100 rooms that were formerly B&B’s, Inns, or part of a hotel or motel.

• It was agreed that campgrounds and mobile homes in addition to boats could also be affordable alternatives for seasonal workers. It was suggested that the Islander Ferry be purchased and converted into dormitory housing.

• It was also suggested the business community could create a partnership whereby a dormitory or condominium complex is developed. Businesses could then have the option to purchase a unit for a seasonal worker. The condo’s do not need to be limited to one size and could be more appealing to transient workers.

• It was agreed that the Dukes County Community Development Corporation (CDC) be re-activated.

• It was pointed out that Cape Cod has done serious outreach to its retirement community to get retired individuals to return to the workforce. It was also suggested that year-round residents who have employment but maybe looking for a second job and high school students should be considered as segments of population to fill seasonal jobs in addition to work release programs for convicted felons.

C. What should be the roles and responsibilities of the private and public sectors to address the seasonal workforce housing needs?

• It was agreed that there ought to be an active partnership between the public and private sectors to address the seasonal workforce housing needs. It was suggested that any partnership be on an island-wide basis instead of town by town.

• The issue of how seasonal workforce housing should be subsidized was debated. It was acknowledged that any governmental subsidy offers certain employers an unfair advantage. It was suggested that if towns make zoning changes in order to make land available for development that could be deemed as a subsidy.

• The Public And Private Partnership could advocate that dormitory housing is a community benefit. In that this form of housing is vital to each town’s economy. It was pointed out the town’s need seasonal workers for police, parks and recreation, in addition to other jobs.

• If land and infrastructure were made available with the support of towns then there could be housing for seasonal workers in the private and public sectors. It was suggested that each town could have two models to justify using town owned land for dormitory housing: one part of the housing is for seasonal public workers and the second part is seasonal workers for the private sector.

• If land near the high school were used for seasonal workforce housing, the infrastructure for water and wastewater would be possible to tie into these facilities. It was suggested that town owned property should be inventoried and then prioritized for possible seasonal workforce housing.

• It was suggested that seasonal workforce housing with the public and private spilt could be described as “community housing” in order to utilize CPC funds.
Before the meeting broke it was agreed that the Housing Work Group would work on the following items:

- Survey Business Community to quantify housing needs
- Consider retirees, high school students, and year-round residents (in need of a second job) as alternatives to importing seasonal workers
- Conduct inventory of town owned property
- Consider forming Public and Private Partnerships
- Education and Outreach campaign to private residences

Meeting adjourned at 6:06 pm.

The next Housing Work Group on Elderly and Assisted Living Housing on Tuesday April 17, 2007 from 4:30 – 6:00 pm at the MVC.

Notes prepared by Christine Flynn.