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Sent: Thursday, December 17, 2015 4:53 PM
To: Paul Foley
Subject: North Bluff Sea Wall Project

To the Martha's Vineyard Commissioners

Dear Commissioners,

Not too long ago, a committee in Oak Bluffs worked tirelessly on a comprehensive plan to restore the Oak Bluffs beaches and waterfront from the end of the seawall at Farm Pond all the way to the south jetty that forms the entrance to the harbor. The vision was simple but the scope enormous. The committee was broadly representational, populated by town officials both elected and appointed and residents both year-round and seasonal.

The focus was squarely on beaches as a conservation resource *and* a human resource. The historic, generational, societal and social, recreational, economic, visual, environmental, and protective qualities, the very essence of the waterfront and its in-town public beaches with class A swimming waters, were all given equal weight. The 'Polar Bears' were as much considered as were eel grass beds. *All* things were considered—swimming, walking, fishing, playing, resting, healing, comfort facilities, universal access, safety, optics from the water and the land, the Island's timeless connection to the sea, and the overarching importance of beaches as central to the island experience—all were on the table.

Over a period of a couple years, numerous, extremely well attended public hearings, visioning sessions, presentations, scoping sessions with state and federal regulatory and oversight agencies were held. The project captured the imagination of beachgoers and conservationists, was applauded by regulators, earned the enthusiastic support and financial commitment of local, regional, state, and federal elected officials (many of them our own beachgoers, it's worth noting), generated excitement and presented amazing opportunities. It provided for human enjoyment, conservation, and infrastructure protection—and it was all beautiful and all done in the Oak Bluffs vernacular. It was supported by Town Meetings who funded the studies that would provide the data necessary for design and engineering. It included removing road run off from beaches, protecting remarkably sound if aged sea walls, defending waterfront parks, homes, roadways, and walkways, safeguarding the wastewater effluent beds. It involved sand, beach grass, rosa rugosa, rock, cement, and wood.

There would be more rock revetment, a strengthened and lengthened jetty, perhaps some breakwaters. It provided comfort facilities, boardwalk access across dunes, universal access not only to the beach but also to the water. There would be rafts for diving once again, a fishing pier, places to rinse off after a swim. Everything was sustainable and renewable. Nothing was over-built, over-engineered, over the top. It squarely faced the inevitability of sea level rise and increasingly ferocious ocean storms. It would employ the best natural methods and materials to protect our maritime resources. It would take advantage of existing protective features of the built environment, bolstering them with additional natural protective elements.

The project was very exciting, very well-supported, about to be carefully and thoughtfully designed and engineered, and hugely expensive. It was presented at scoping sessions of oversight agencies on both the state and federal levels who applauded the cohesiveness and reach of the project. It earned the support of our congressmen and senator, who were so impressed their respective staffs were enthusiastically anticipating earmarks in the millions of transportation funding dollars. The project's proponents had done a remarkable job of establishing the project as critically important, broad but focused. They addressed, in one comprehensive plan, conservation, infrastructure protection, intermodal transportation, economic growth, recognition of the historic social significance of the beaches, the importance of our connections along the waterfront to varied transportation facilities, and the need to protect our wastewater system's only discharge beds.

There was another notable but not so unusual feature of this project—many of those regulators and elected officials had fond memories of long summer days spent on those very beaches. In no way and at no time was this a hard sell—over and over again, the project found support deep in the hearts of the people needed most to support it for its good science and sound planning and fiscal responsibility—but in the end, what resonated for funders and regulators alike were the memories of how much their time on the Island's beaches meant to them, their families, and friends.

Tragically, the entire project was hijacked by the Oak Bluffs Conservation Commission and a few rogue committee members and it devolved under their regulatory rather than visionary oversight from a system-wide approach into smaller choppy projects that have ranged from the successful use of dunes on one part of the waterfront to the urban, engineered, out of character work proposed for the North Bluff, from the costly and complete failure of a rain garden in one of the waterfront parks to the deposit of toxic waste materials from under the drawbridge on one of the Island's most beloved family beaches. A very ragged performance . . .

Millions of dollars in earmarked federal funding evaporated, the entire vision faded away, and the Conservation Commission chased funding that resulted in unnecessary urbanization—all because they lacked a cohesive vision for the waterfront and their approach morphed from comprehensive to narrow-focused and short-sighted. Astonishingly, the Conservation Commission has brought us to the point that an engineer hired by the ConCom, working under their direction and with their full and passionate support, actually proposed eliminating one of our beaches, armouring a portion of our waterfront with corrugated sheet metal, without a single public presentation of the final proposal, which effectively fences us away from the ocean and prevents access to the shoreline at the single most important gateway to the Island. It looks horrible and its performance is questionable over the long haul.

How did we get from sustainable and natural to epoxy-coated?! From beloved family beach to no beach at all?! Oak Bluffs has done a pitiful job of protecting its resources, but to those who would have us believe the sea wall has failed, I would point out that it might be old, but it is not universally considered failed.

Here's what will work . . . Restrict the Conservation Commission to their statutory duties. Restore the waterfront visioning process. Halt the proposal for the North Bluff, go back to the drawing board and insist the engineers and designers understand us well, economically as well as environmentally and, certainly, aesthetically. Follow the example of the current Planning Board and the earlier beach committee and involve the public.

Stop chasing funding for piecemeal projects. Do it all and do it right.

Restore and preserve small but mighty beaches, just like the ones that have always existed along the waterfront. They're the reason the sea wall isn't failed. They also happen to be what the voters and taxpayers have been promised. We can use the extraordinary political clout enjoyed by a town on an Island cherished by players on the world's stage. We can appeal to people who come to us for respite to help us conceive and fund projects that preserve and protect rather than armour and destroy. If we all work together, rather than allowing a handful of bureaucrats to marginalize us, condescend to us, lock us out of the decision-making, we can work wonders.

The project I refer to was underway six years ago and could have been substantially completed now if not derailed. It was responsible and responsive. It was meant to position us in the face of climate change and sea level rise. We could have built a body of knowledge that would have benefitted other seaside communities. We were in the forefront of something really terrific and visionary. We can recapture the excitement of doing something so right, so distinctive, so "Island". This isn't any of those . . . Thanks for listening.

Kerry Scott