

*Town of Oak Bluffs
Conservation Commission
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Martha's Vineyard Commissioners
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PO Box 1447
Oak Bluffs, MA 02557

Sent via email

RE: North Bluff Seawall Project

Dear Commissioners:

A key point about the North Bluff seawall project was not raised at the December 10 hearing and I believe it merits your consideration.

It is the concept of the common good - the greatest possible good for the greatest number of people in a community.

A group of passionate local residents is concerned about the aesthetics of a steel sheet pile seawall and the viability of the upcoming beach nourishment project. I'd like to address these concerns in the context of protecting the overall common good.

The North Bluff seawall is a failed seawall. The potential collapse of the seawall has serious regional implications. If it collapses it will damage or destroy a road heavily traveled by all members of the Island community. It is the vehicular access road to the passenger ferries from Falmouth, Hyannis and Rhode Island. It is used by pedestrians for access to the harbor and steamship authority and for scenic strolls. The collapse of this site would be a regional transportation, environmental and economic nightmare. This project is necessary to protect the coastal infrastructure of a heavily used, vital transportation route. Replacement of a deteriorated seawall is an infrastructure protection project; failure of this seawall would truly be a regional disaster.

Climate change has disrupted the status quo. New solutions are required to address more severe coastal impacts. A new seawall must be designed to withstand rising seas and stronger and more frequent storms and storm surges. For all the reasons outlined at the hearing by Carlos Pena, CLE Engineering, the Town's engineer for this project, the steel sheet pile seawall is the best option to protect the site. Unlike a concrete wall it is able to be driven 30 feet underground and thus not be subject to undermining. It is ridged, which will help break up wave action as opposed to a strictly vertical concrete wall. Construction will be much less invasive. It will be made of the strongest, most durable steel available. The color gray has been chosen to make it as unobtrusive as possible. Change is difficult. Tradition is important to this community. But the integrity of

our shores is at risk and the Town is obligated to protect the coastal infrastructure for the good of the entire Island community and to do so using the best engineered design.

The Town is well aware that beaches are the backbone of the Island economy and that the downtown beaches are especially beloved. That is why we are working to protect and improve them. The North Bluff beach is disappearing due to the lack of a natural sediment source, increased coastal erosion, and sea level rise. We have a well-developed plan to replenish the downtown beaches. The Town is currently working on permitting and funding for this project. It would be ideal to have the sand in place when the seawall is rebuilt, but beach nourishment permitting and funding processes are complex and time consuming. Hundreds of thousands of people arrive on the Island in Oak Bluffs and thus the preservation of our beaches and coastal infrastructure is of importance to the entire community.

The Town worked hard to seek funding for this project. The award of grant funding is a testament to the necessity of this project. The Town has an excellent working relationship with the funding agencies. If this project is not constructed our opportunities for future funding could be at risk, including funds for the extensive beach renourishment project for the downtown beaches and other climate change adaptation projects. These projects include stabilization of the East Chop Bluff, which protects a road with beautiful scenic vistas enjoyed by all residents and Island visitors, and protection of the Oak Bluffs Harbor and Sunset Lake, the salt marshes of Sengekontacket and Brush Ponds, and our low-lying coastal roads and bike paths. This project is one piece of a much larger plan to address climate change impacts. If this project is not successful the remaining pieces of the adaptation plan could be jeopardized, to the detriment of the entire Island community.

A steel sheet pile seawall is a non-traditional approach to protecting a special site. In light of climate change impacts, however, it is the best, strongest, most well-designed approach to protecting the coastal infrastructure. In a changing world, on an Island in the middle of a rising sea, this project is vital to protect the integrity of the bank and the road above it.

As we struggle along in our day to day lives it is easy to forget that sometimes it is necessary to set aside individual preferences in order to serve the greater good.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Liz Durkee
Conservation Agent
Town of Oak Bluffs