

Martha's Vineyard Scenic Roads Initiative

Minutes of Meeting 1 of the Scenic Roads Committee

Date: April 30, 2014, 5:30 p.m.

Location: MVC Offices, 33 New York Avenue, Oak Bluffs

Present:

Committee Fred Hancock (Acting Chairman), Trip Barnes (MVC), John Breckenridge (MVC), Greg Coogan (Oak Bluffs), Michael Donaroma (Edgartown), Madeline Fisher (MVC), Stuart Fuller (Edgartown), Dan Greenbaum (Chilmark), Richard Knabel (West Tisbury), Joan Malkin (MVC), Kathy Newman (MVC), Linda Sibley (MVC), Brian Smith (MVC), Craig Whittaker (Tisbury)

MVC Staff: Christine Flynn, Priscilla Leclerc, Mark London, Bill Veno

1. Welcome and Introductions

Fred Hancock welcomed everyone on behalf of the Commission and people introduced themselves. The Committee is made up of MVC Commissioners from each town and from representatives appointed by town Boards of Selectmen and the County. It was noted that Jay Grande has also been appointed by the Tisbury Board of Selectmen but could not attend.

Fred explained the background. The MVC has long been interested in protecting scenic roads dating back to the original Island Road DCPC. Last fall, Craig Whittaker met the MVC and town boards suggesting additional effort on rural roads. The MVC's Planning Economic Development Committee met several times and recommended setting up a Martha's Vineyard Scenic Roads Initiative, to be guided by a Scenic Roads Committee.

The purpose of the Committee is to provide an Island-wide focus on roads and make recommendations about how we can better protect the visual character of ones that we like and improve the ones we don't. The Committee will be an Island-wide venue for talking with NSTAR and MassDOT, which should give us a stronger voice.

Mark London summarized past MVC efforts with respect to scenic roads.

- In 1975, the MVC designated the Island Road DCPC which provided a framework for town zoning to limit development along key roads. Its main use has been to limit curb cuts, and the height and setbacks of buildings. However, towns could use it for to establish additional measures, such as regulations on fences and vegetation.
- The MVC considers impacts on scenic roads when it reviews Developments of Regional Impact, with respect to issues such as curb cuts, siting of buildings and parking, and vegetative buffers. The MVC adopted a DRI Policy on Site Design and Landscape that deals with some of these issues. The policy could also be used by town boards in their review of roadside development.
- A few years ago, the MVC had an intern do the first phase of an inventory of scenic roads, delineating the roadside viewshed and taking extensive photos. The Commission

put out a document – “Martha's Vineyard Scenic Roads” – in 2010, incorporating this information and outlining possible strategies.

- In the Island Plan, the overall Land Use Guidance Map includes the roadside viewshed as a component of the Critical Resource Protection Areas. In the latest revision of the DRI Checklist, any development in this area has to be referred for possible review by the MVC.

2. Organizational

It was agreed that since some of the towns had not made their appointments to the Committee yet, Fred Hancock would chair this meeting and possibly the next one, at which time the Committee would chose a chairman.

It was agree that the Committee would meet monthly, on the last Thursday of the month at 5:30 p.m., at the MVC Offices.

3. Presentation on Scenic Roads

Craig Whittaker gave an overview of his concerns related to rural roads. His focus is the public right-of-way. He gave examples of questionable interventions, such as the widening of the Edgartown - Vineyard Haven Road, the construction of the Big and Little Bridges with their excessive signage, and the new NSTAR poles on the Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road and Moshup Trail. He suggested three approaches.

- Start a conversation with MassDOT about road design standards that meet all legal and engineering requirements, but are adapted to Martha's Vineyard. It would be desirable that elected officials be involved in these conversations.
- Have an engineering firm at our side to help develop a design manual that would have the force of law.
- Use TIP projects, such as the Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road, to start discussions about what appropriate design standards would be. A segment of the Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road could be used as a demonstration project.

4. Initiatives

4.1 NSTAR: The Committee chose Thursday, May 29 at 5:30 p.m. for a first meeting with NSTAR. An agenda and a list of questions will sent to NSTAR in advance of the meeting. The agenda will include, at least, the following items:

- Undersea Cable Project and Upgraded Distribution Network - update,
- Vegetation Maintenance - including the use of herbicides and trimming policies and practices,
- Planned Pole Upgrades - status of upcoming projects, overall consultation and approval process,
- Tree-Planting Program,
- Possible Changes to Network in Response to Community Concerns – rerouting, undergrounding.

In addition to meeting Jerry McDermott, who is in charge of community relations, it would be desirable to have experts and decision makers who could discuss the technical and policy issues, either at the first meeting or at subsequent meetings that focus on specific topics. We should ask Jerry to supply relevant written documents such as policies.

Comments and questions from individual committee members include the following.

- It would be desirable to get a map of all poles on the Island.
- NSTAR has said that it would cost about \$1.0 to \$1.5 million dollars a mile to underground.
- Edgartown had NSTAR bury the utilities on North Water Street. It cost \$3 million for a one-mile section, which was quite complex. This was financed privately. It did not include burying the transformer or switching station because NSTAR said their crews working here are not trained to work in confined spaces. Apparently, such training takes about a half day and it was suggested that they get the necessary training.
- We need clarification of how an undergrounding project could be financed. NSTAR had indicated that if it was financed through NSTAR, the cost would be borne by all ratepayers on Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard, which might be difficult to get accepted. We should clarify what alternatives there are for financing island improvements by towns or Island-wide?
- We should find out how much the recent new cabling project and new poles cost. What would the differential cost increase have been compared to undergrounding?
- NSTAR buried cables on Chappaquiddick to better protect them in case of storm, because of the difficulty of getting there quickly to make repairs.
- The Town of Tisbury is interested in pursuing the undergrounding of wires on Beach Road as part of the MassDOT Beach Road project between Winds Up and Five Corners.
- It would be useful to have an expert who could advise us in our discussions with NSTAR. Michael Donaroma will contact an acquaintance who might be able to provide input.

4.2 Priority TIP Projects: Mark London and Bill Veno gave an overview of the situation.

TIP projects are funded by the state and federal governments. Certain town-owned arterial and collector roads are eligible for funding. Local roads are not; State roads are funded from a different budget (STIP). The Island receives a budget of nearly \$500,000 a year. The Joint Transportation Committee recommends how these funds are programmed. Normally, the town in which a project is located is responsible for doing project design; however, in recent year, given the limited technical and financial capacity of the towns, MassDOT has agreed to do the design of some projects at its expense.

Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road: The first phase of repaving the Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road is the TIP project planned for Federal Fiscal Year 2015 and 2016. This was initially proposed as a simple repaving job, since the road is starting to deteriorate. MassDOT had agreed to do the design work on the assumption that it would be simple. If the Island wants to explore the possibility of more substantial modifications, such as changing the pavement width, MassDOT would expect the MVC and/or towns to take the

leadership in looking at options and coming up with a proposal; MassDOT is prepared to give technical input and cost estimates. The design and permitting process can be quite lengthy, we need to clarify what the deadlines are. It would be desirable to line up an alternative project for FFY2015 in case it takes time to reach a consensus and finalize a design for the Edgartown–Vineyard Haven Road. The following are some comments and issues to look at.

- Can the lane width and/or shoulders be narrowed to reduce the overall width of pavement?
- If so, can the excess space be used to widen the buffer between the road and SUP?
- MassDOT has new Healthy Community standards calling for wider shoulders to accommodate other modes. Is this relevant when there is an adjacent SUP? Even when there is an adjacent SUP, bicyclists have a right to be in the road and having even a relatively narrow shoulder could be important on a high-speed road with many trucks such as this.
- Can there be a physical barrier between the road and bike path?
- What should happen to bus stops? The police have asked the VTA not to stop in the roadway anymore because of the high traffic levels along this road.
- Stuart Fuller has arranged that Northeastern University Transportation Engineering students will look at the Edgartown–Vineyard Haven Road next winter.
- There could be different standards for different locations. The ends of the roads have high residential density. The High School and other institutions are in the middle. Bus pulloffs may be more appropriate in some locations than in others.

Beach Road: The project programmed for FFY 2017 and 2018 is Beach Road between Wind's Up and Five Corners. This is a state road, so MassDOT will do the design. Following a public meeting a year ago, MassDOT has developed two options,. With one option, the Shared Use Path on the side of Beach Road, which is being extended into Oak Bluffs as part of the replacement drawbridge project, would continue to the Tisbury Market Place where it would link to Veterans Park and the rest of the SUP network. With the other option, bicyclists would travel in bike shoulders, between the travel lane and sidewalk. It was originally thought that it would be possible to incorporate the project within the existing 40' right-of-way. However, the initial design envisions land acquisition to enlarge the right-of-way to 43', in order to accommodate design standards. These options will be presented at a public hearing on March 21, 2014

4.3 Other Strategies: Additional strategies that could be used to protect and enhance scenic roads include the following.

- Publishing a design manual or guidelines to set parameters for future road improvements and retrofits.
- Instituting a tree-planting program, especially along the new NSTAR poles and where the cleared roadside area is excessively wide.
- Enlarging the requirement for project review of public and/or private projects, by town boards and/or the MVC.
- Changing zoning regulations, such as for roadside fences, curb cuts, vegetation, etc.

The desire to preserve the character of Vineyard roads has to be balanced with safety and functional needs. This includes balancing aesthetic concerns with the objectives of the Complete Streets Movement, which advocates for ensuring that all modes of transportation are safely accommodated within the right-of-way. There will be a *“Complete Streets Forum for Martha’s Vineyard”* on Tuesday, May 20th, from 1 to 3 p.m., at the Oak Bluffs Public Library. The speakers will focus mainly on issues related to implementing a complete streets policy, but have also been asked to discuss the relation between complete streets and scenic values.

We should discuss how much the Scenic Roads Committee wants to focus on the view from the road and how much on the road itself.

5. Next Steps

MVC staff will carry out the following actions in the coming months.

- Issue a Request for Expressions of Interest (REI) for engineering or planning consultants.
- Put together a library of design manuals and other relevant documents.
- Carry out an inventory of road characteristics this summer.

We could use the upcoming summer season to engage the public in various ways, such as by holding a forum or carrying out a survey.

- Some committee members thought that this would be a useful way to raise public awareness, get feedback on what the public’s concerns are, and begin a dialogue on trade-offs involved, such as wanting to narrow roads and shoulders to improve scenic values versus widening them to accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians.
- Others thought the Committee has ample information from past surveys and that it was preferable to wait until we have specific questions or options before seeking further public input.
- It was suggested that we use social media.
- It would be useful to have visuals when reaching out to the public.

We should clarify what federal or state Scenic Byways designation involves.

It was suggested that we take a few simple and achievable ideas – such as agreeing to use wooden guardrails and reducing the number of signs – and try to get something accomplished. Other challenges, such as dealing effectively with NSTAR, could take a decade.