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March 24, 2016

RE: Squibnocket Beach Projects (DRI 661 & DRI 338-M2)

Dear Commissioners:

The Vineyard Conservation Society (VCS) would like to express our appreciation for the diligent work on the part of all parties to craft a solution to the immediate problems of erosion at Squibnocket Beach. The shared hope is that it will balance the interests of homeowners and town residents with the preservation of our natural environment.

Our primary purpose in submitting testimony today is to note that this issue, while of pressing concern today, is an example of the type of project that will become increasingly common. The challenges facing the town and Squibnocket homeowners point to the need for forward-looking planning: Island-wide, but especially in areas facing rapid erosion. In an era characterized both by sea level rise and highly valuable coastal real estate, active regional planning – and regulation – is now more critical than ever.

Recognizing that planning for the Squibnocket beach projects is at an advanced stage and that major changes may not be feasible (nor are delays desirable), our position as an environmental advocacy group remains broadly the same: i.e., that managed retreat is the preferred option in the face of coastal erosion, that soft stabilization should be used wherever possible, and that we must avoid the placement of important infrastructure in the path of sea level rise, in part because of the inevitable push for more construction (and possible public funding thereof) to stabilize these structures in coming decades. Below, we have included excerpts from our April 2014 testimony for the Town of Chilmark that addressed those issues in more detail:

One concern raised by the proposal to build an elevated roadway is the impact this will have on the ability of Squibnocket Beach to maintain itself as a natural system. In general, VCS supports the use of soft stabilization where managed retreat is not realistic. We therefore support the removal of the stone revetment to allow the beach to migrate naturally and re-establish itself as a valuable town resource. The proposed construction, however, will eventually result in new hard stabilization once the shoreline recedes to meet one or both endpoints of the bridge. The impact of these hard points (intended to support a bridge, not to stabilize a beach as are traditional revetments) on natural beach movement are unpredictable, but not likely to be positive.

. . .

While we know sea levels will continue to rise, and at an increasing pace, there is tremendous uncertainty regarding the exact amount (anything from 2 to 6.5 feet is reasonably likely, but even

greater amounts are possible). Further, general patterns of beach migration are somewhat predictable, but no one can guess exactly where the sand will be in 30 years, even absent climate change. Due to this uncertainty, solutions that emphasize flexibility, portability, and low initial cost are quite possibly more practical, in addition to having a softer impact on the natural environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Richard Toole, President, Board of Directors

Jeremy Houser, Ecologist & Communications

Brendan O'Neill, Executive Director

Vineyard Conservation Society