

Letter in Support of Preserving Our Community

Dear Martha's Vineyard Commissioners:

I have been coming to Martha's Vineyard since 1965. In the late 1980s we bought a house in Edgartown on Turkeyland Cove and ever since then we spend 4-6 months here. The Vineyard has been my official residence for the last 25 years. We consider this our home, although in the winter we return to Asia, where I spent most of my professional career as a development economist and where I am now a visiting professor at NYU in Shanghai. We love the Vineyard, have many friends across the Island and take great interest in its wellbeing and development. It is for that reason that I am writing this letter to express my concerns about the HVH development and to support preserving our very special community.

While we don't live in the community immediately impacted by the HVH development we do believe that the implications of this development affect the broader community of Martha's Vineyard and this does worry us. My personal concerns, in fact, go beyond this particular development. They also apply to prospective developments whose planners may see the decisions and actions taken in this case as establishing precedence for the future. Before voicing my concerns, I should note that I do not claim to have all the facts regarding this venture; most of my knowledge is from letters we've received from citizens living in the immediate area.

My Concerns

1. The size and scope of this development are very large, by Vineyard standards, and I am concerned that its far-reaching social, economic and environmental implications may not have been considered as thoroughly as they should be in determining the net impact on our community.

As a development economist, I spent much of my career working with development institutions, private investors and financial institutions in identifying and assessing projects in terms of their longer and broader societal impacts – so as to add more far-reaching analysis to the narrower assessment of the developers. Whether these investigations are in highly developed or lesser-developed areas the principles and guidelines are the same. Namely, major projects need to be assessed in terms of the net long-term physical, economic and environmental effects they have on the community.

In this case, I am concerned that the expanding size and scope of this significant project may result in net negative impacts on our community – not only the immediate neighborhood but the community at large. While generating a number of desirable (and measurable) results, the development also threatens many of the highly important characteristics that define the fabric of this area and that contribute (less measurably) to the unique and real value of our community. These characteristics include, among others, its charm, casual pace, minimal development, unspoiled environment, historical preservation and the absence of shopping malls, large hotels, highways and retail chains. As a small island, the Vineyard serves as an escape from the fast-moving and glitzy environment of many alternative destinations. These particular qualities appeal to a certain market that chooses the Vineyard for exactly those reasons. They

constitute the “brand” and are the drivers of its success. Their value is difficult to measure, except that without them the brand would be greatly diminished.

Unfortunately, many of the qualities that define the uniqueness and success of the Island inadvertently also have associated “costs”. The economy is almost entirely dependent on a short season, income levels of permanent residents are low, land development is greatly restricted, investment opportunities are limited, and changes are slow to evolve.

However, addressing these challenges by allowing projects that ignore or jeopardize the factors responsible for the Island’s success is a dangerous move that will have permanent consequences. “Killing the goose” will destroy the appeal that drives the Vineyard’s success. Changing the standards and removing the restrictions that protect the Island’s uniqueness will necessitate the Vineyard to compete with other destinations that have far greater resources, more developed infrastructure, greater scale and other advantages to serve the market looking for that kind of destination than the Vineyard has or could expect to have. The net impact will almost certainly be unfavorable for the community.

A possible solution to this dilemma suggests:

- (a) Find a reasonable compromise that allows an innovative development to be undertaken but ensures that the actions do not destroy or threaten those very special qualities that define the Vineyard’s uniqueness. Size, scale, sustainability and shared goals of the developer, island and neighborhood are essential considerations that must be addressed. Net impacts need to be determined; and
- (b) Continue looking for creative and effective programs, investments and other initiatives to address the negative implications associated with the protection of those qualities on which the Vineyard depends.

2. My second concern is the seemingly insensitive spirit with which the development is being executed and the expansive plans for further development that appear inappropriate and go far beyond the original scope and intention that were a part of the approved Master Plan. The modifications and expansions subsequent to HVH’s earlier approvals and their departure from permits issued in the 1990s appear to be in violation of the community’s fundamental principles and objectives. The developer seems to be testing the boundaries of these principles and permits. What’s more, these deviations and disregard for earlier guidelines and approvals set a dangerous precedence for future developments!

A possible solution suggests:

- (a) The developer should be asked to review what has been done to date and to re-state his long-term vision, goals, targets and plans, in as much detail as possible. The Commission should re-consider whether or not these actions and plans are in the best long-term interest of the Community; and
- (b) Since both sides in this dispute have reasonable people among them, it should be possible to engage in constructive discussions based on mutual respect, shared values, and consideration of the net impacts of specific actions. Hopefully, the Commission can help facilitate these discussions to find acceptable compromises.

3. While we are all stakeholders in this development, the benefits and costs for the stakeholders are highly skewed. The residents in the immediate neighborhood of the HVH not only receive little or no stakeholder benefits but incur major costs. While this is not an unusual situation, in this case it should not be ignored as this subset of stakeholders include citizens who are highly committed to and actively involved in the long-term sustainability and preservation of the Island and the wellbeing of its residents.

Many of the near and long-term impacts on the immediate neighborhood associated with some of the development's activities and the deteriorating relations with the developer have created great unhappiness among residents in the immediate neighborhood. This concerns me, as the individuals affected in this case are among some of our community's most important leaders and benefactors. Their devotion and commitment to Martha's Vineyard is highly significant. They include selfless and dedicated citizens who seek not financial or personal gains from what they do for the community but have a sincere long-term regard for the Vineyard's history, present challenges and future development. Their voices must be heard and given full credence. They are truly disturbed by what is happening and the Commission must be sure to factor the possible consequences of this into their assessment of the HVH actions and plans. Again, the net impact of the development on the long-term wellbeing of our community must be considered.

I have not identified specific actions, investments or incidents concerning this development as there are more qualified people to do so. My concerns center around the overall direction of how this development project is evolving and the broader long-term net implications it has for the wellbeing and sustainability of the Martha's Vineyard community. We trust that these concerns will be considered in your decisions and we thank you, in advance, for doing so.

Sincerely,

William Reinfeld
Yvonne Kwauk
January 1, 2021