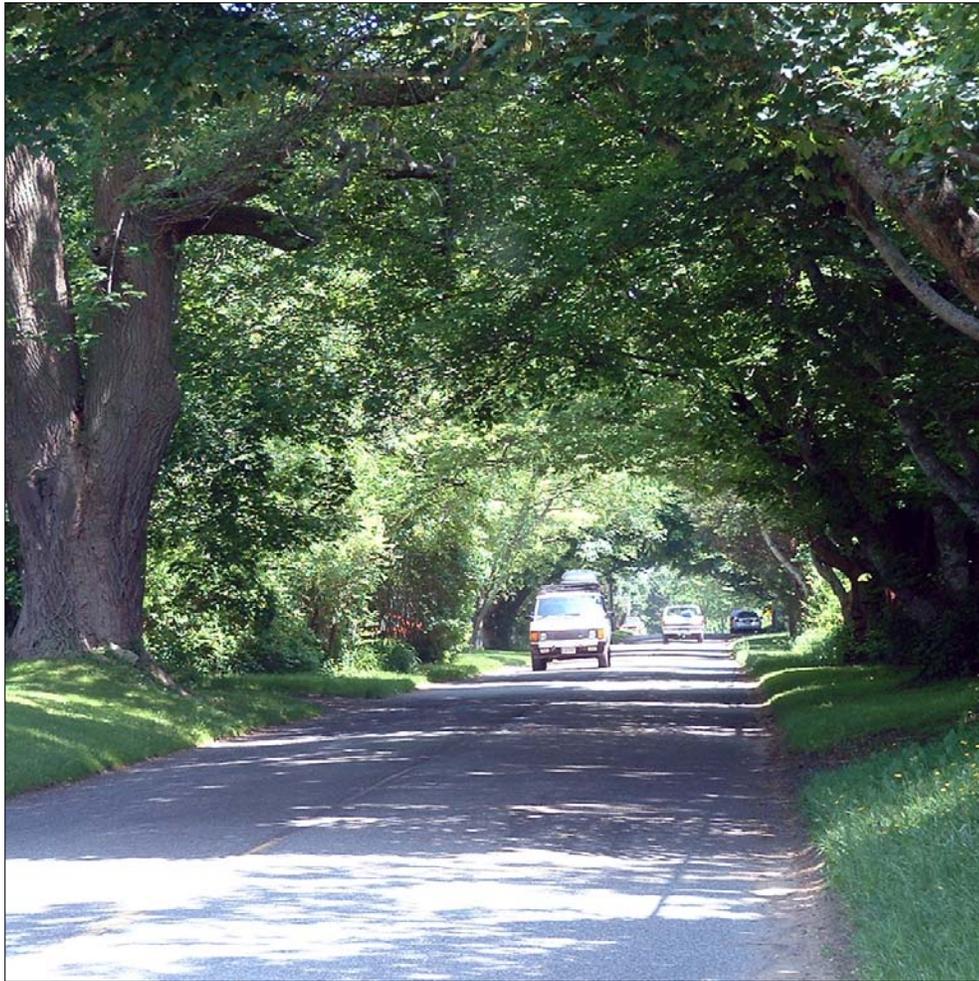


LOOKING AT THE VINEYARD  
WITH AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

# **VIEW FROM THE ROAD: How Can We Preserve Our Rural Roadsides?**

FORUM PROCEEDINGS



Held on Wednesday, June 23, 2004  
Polly Hill Arboretum Far Barn, West Tisbury

“View From the Road: How to Preserve Our Rural Roadsides”, the second forum of a highly successful series in celebration of the Martha’s Vineyard Commission’s 30th Anniversary, was held on Wednesday, June 23, 2004 at the Far Barn of the Polly Hill Arboretum in West Tisbury.

The series, “Looking At The Vineyard With An Eye To The Future”, was produced by the Martha’s Vineyard Commission, with the cooperation of the All-Island Selectmen, and funded by a grant from the Edey Foundation. The Commission also thanks the Vineyard Open Land Foundation for permission to use “Looking at the Vineyard”, the title of their landmark 1973 planning document.

This second forum, dealing with issues of planning for and preserving our rural roadsides, was co-sponsored by the Polly Hill Arboretum. Thanks to the staff of Polly Hill and the MVC for their contributions. The Organizing Committee included Judy Crawford (Moderator), Linda Dewitt (Commissioner), Mark London (Executive Director), Katherine Newman (Commissioner), Megan Ottens-Sargent (Commissioner; responsible for the Road Art exhibition), and Linda Sibley (Commissioner; producer of this forum). Photos were taken by Mark London, Linda Sibley and Megan Ottens-Sargent. These proceedings were written by Judy Crawford and edited by Jo-Ann Taylor. Thanks also to Christine Rose and MVTV for videotaping and broadcast of this production.

Approximately 125 interested Islanders gathered at the Visitor’s Center at the Polly Hill Arboretum for an exhibition of “Road Art”. This two-day exhibition, curated by Megan Ottens-Sargent, featured paintings showing how various Vineyard artists see the road in the Vineyard landscape. Following the art show, the audience walked over to the Far Barn for the “View from the Road” forum.



*Michael Van Valkenburgh, Craig Whitaker, Mark London and Larry Mercier*

The forum, moderated by Judy Crawford, was made up of the following elements:

- Guest speaker, Michael Van Valkenburgh, landscape architect
- Guest speaker, Craig Whitaker, architect, urban designer, professor at NYU
- Panel Discussion:
  - Mark London, Executive Director, Martha’s Vineyard Commission
  - Larry Mercier, retired Selectman and Highway Supervisor, Edgartown
- A question and answer period.

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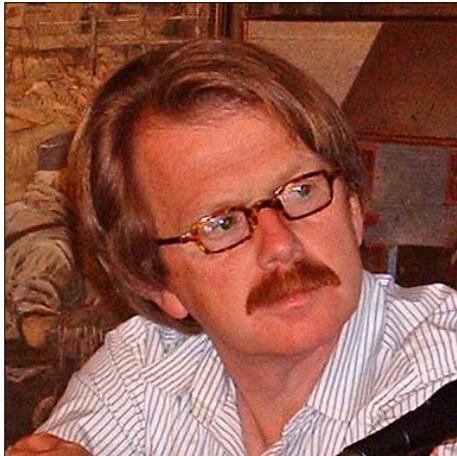


Any discussion of rural roadsides encompasses a wide range of topics. In order to structure the evening's presentation, a line was drawn along the edge of the public right-of way. Our first guest speaker, Michael Van Valkenburgh, was asked to speak about what makes good rural roadside views outside that line. Our second guest speaker, Craig Whitaker, was asked to concentrate his remarks to what goes on inside the line.

DVDs of all forums and written summaries of the proceedings are available in all Vineyard libraries or from the Martha's Vineyard Commission; proceedings are available on the Commission's website at [www.mvcommission.org](http://www.mvcommission.org).

# 1. Rural Roadsides Beyond the Public Right-of-Way – Michael Van Valkenburgh

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*Michael Van Valkenburgh*

The first guest speaker was Michael Van Valkenburgh, a landscape architect who lives in New York City and Chilmark. He worked with Kevin Lynch from 1979 to 1982. On the Vineyard, he collaborated on siting the New Agricultural Hall in West Tisbury and on the master plan for the Polly Hill Arboretum. He designed the landscaping for the West Chop Club as well as the private gardens of many Vineyard homes.

Michael Van Valkenburgh began his presentation by explaining that the roads of Martha’s Vineyard are “the delivery system for the Island experience”. When flying over the Vineyard, it may be shocking how many houses there really are on the Island. Yet when driving the roads, the experience is still, for the most part, surprisingly rural.

This juxtaposition of increased development with the rural character of the roads may be masking suburbanization. However, because of the Vineyard’s roadsides views, the aesthetics of the Island remain pleasing, and the experience is still rural.

In fact, Martha’s Vineyard has become increasingly forested over the last fifty years. Despite the fact that there are many times more houses here today than there used to be, Martha’s Vineyard remains a remarkably green place.

He urged the Island to undertake a full mapping of its roads, prioritizing the scenic values of all roads. A number of conservation organizations have already undertaken some of this work, but their projects need to be standardized and coordinated. Each section of a given road needs to be prioritized in terms of its preservation value, making it clear to all conservation groups which areas are the most important to preserve. The Martha’s Vineyard Commission is uniquely positioned to coordinate this work.



One consequence of increased reforestation along the roads is that water views have become obstructed over time. Conscious effort needs to be made to open up view channels to offer a peek at the water where possible.

It is unrealistic to assume that all roads will be green. Often people of less means have to build directly along the roadside, rather than setting structures further back on larger tracts of land. Despite this, green breaks of space between towns help retain the overall rural atmosphere.

Clustered town centers can also help to create a rural town feeling, if separated from the next town by green areas. A good example of such a town center is historic West Tisbury, with Alley's General Store, the Congregational Church, the Senior Center, the Library, the Grange Hall and even the gas station, which is clustered as part of the town, not tailing out on its periphery.

#### Characteristics of Rural Roadsides:

- Clustered business areas
- Off-road parking to the rear or side of buildings
- Clear entrances and egresses in each town
- Forested areas between towns
- An intentional mix of foreground, middle ground and background views
- Use of green screening at the roadsides in front of housing and commercial buildings
- Resistance to sprawl

He showed a series of slides that illustrated these characteristics. Each slide showed a view of something that he felt captured the essence of "rural" character as one drives by.



North Road Tree Canopy: What visitors see in front of them, particularly where the road bends or comes to an intersection, is integral to preserving the rural experience. Intersections and bends are a top priority for preserving forests and green space.



View of Vanderhoop House at Gay Head Overlook: People have always valued high vantage points. They provide refuge. From positions like this, visitors gain a long view of the topography of the Island. Long views provided our ancestors with the ability to see the enemy coming or wild animals stalking, thus engendering a sense of safety and control over one's environment.



Packer's Storage Barns on Beach Road: Such structures highlight local industry. They connect us to businesses or trades that are economic drivers on the Island.



*View of Boats in the Harbor: A view of boats at anchor reminds us that we truly are on an Island.*



*West Tisbury Congregational Church: This building is an architectural treasure. It anchors the historic town center and is an integral part of one's image of West Tisbury. We must not allow such treasures to be marginalized by relegating them to the outskirts of town. They define a town.*



West Chop Light House:  
*This is a prime example of the way in which architecture can frame a view of the water, thereby creating a classic setting.*



Chilmark Stone Wall:  
*Visible stonewalls provide foreground interest and evoke images of the craftsmen who created them. Foreground, middle ground and background all play an essential role in rural roadside views. The up-Island roads are blessed with many different types of stonewalls. They add interest to the view, especially when close to the road.*



Allen Farm off South Road in Chilmark: A view of sheep grazing on rolling meadows in the middle ground, with Chilmark Pond and the Atlantic Ocean in the background, is irresistible. This is the kind of vista that stops traffic and cries out for cameras. Here, there is a minimal foreground that creates an endless sense of openness. The mix of strong foregrounds and open views and endless backgrounds is very desirable.



Rolling Hay Meadow on an Edgartown Farm: The topography of a rolling hillside is very attractive. Open meadows along a country road can create such a view, as this meadow does. The hand of nature creates the topographical interest; the hand of man creates the agricultural interest.



Small Business on State Road on Outskirts of Tisbury: This slide provided an example of “what not to do.” The building has no redeeming architectural value and creates a suburban “tail” to the town of Tisbury, an example of sprawl. It would have been better to cluster this building more tightly with other small businesses with shared parking, closer to town, leaving open green and wooded areas separating the towns.



Up-Island Cronig’s Parking Lot: This project attempts to screen a large parking lot with native plantings along the roadside. While the effect is pleasing and somewhat effective, it would have been more effective to place the parking lot to the side or the rear of the building. From the road, one experiences a massive parking lot, which could have been mitigated if the building itself was close to the road.



West Chop Club: This clubhouse sits simply on the land. There is little landscaping, just a few preserved trees for shade and structure. No shrubs, no gardens. The overall effect is peaceful.



West Tisbury Public Safety Building: Another example of "what not to do." There is no buffer shielding this large municipal building and open parking lot from the road. It intrudes on the viewer with nothing to preserve the rural feeling in the area. Placing the parking to the rear or side of the main building and screening with vegetation would have helped greatly.



*Intersection of Old County Road and State Road, West Tisbury: Here, a wooded view greets the driver. This effect lasts a long time in the mind of the viewer.*

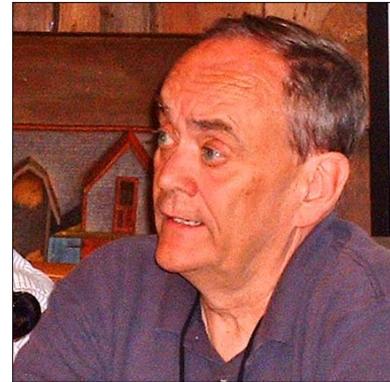


*Beetlebung Corner: Varied plant types change dramatically before the eyes, adding breadth and depth to the experience of driving into the center of Chilmark.*

## 2. Rural Roadsides Inside the Public Right-of-Way – Craig Whitaker

The second guest speaker was Craig Whitaker, an architect and urban designer and Professor of Planning at New York University. He is the author of "Architecture and the American Dream." He lives in New York City and Vineyard Haven.

Craig Whitaker began his remarks by saying that the people of Martha's Vineyard need to retain control of the look and feel of our roads.



*Craig Whitaker*

Several years ago, when the Vermont Department of Transportation announced that they were going to "upgrade" some of Vermont's rural roads, the public response was immediate. Industries, small business owners, conservationists and residents rose up with one voice against the state initiative, saying, "We don't want it!"

Like Vermont, Martha's Vineyard depends to a great extent on tourism, and tourists who come to either Vermont or the Vineyard want to see appealing, green, rural roads. It is to our benefit, for both aesthetic and economic reasons, to preserve the quality of our roads and fight to re-establish the character of those roads that have been spoiled.

He offered a series of slides, particularly along denser areas on down-Island roads, citing examples where we have lost control with unfortunate results. There are lessons to be learned from these examples. With concerted effort, some problem areas can be reversed. Others will stand as a reminder of what we should never again allow to happen in the future.

The principle lesson to be learned is that we must take control of the planning and, with a shared vision of what constitutes rural road, work to maintain them for everyone's benefit.

Things To Be Avoided (Things that say, "Welcome to Anywhere USA."):

- Wide shoulders consisting of bare concrete or a wide sea of asphalt
- High barrier fencing with no vegetation
- Galvanized steel barriers on curves and bridges
- Bikes forced onto congested streets
- High, galvanized steel barriers where bike paths run close to roads
- High curbs along street edges
- Excessive no parking signs, high posts to deter cars from parking



- Multiple, geometrically regular, suburban-looking groups of mailboxes
- Sidewalks constructed of concrete squares, forming a long, straight line
- Concrete intersections with high curbs
- Uniform width on all streets
- An excess of painted crosswalks and pedestrian markings
- Confusing pedestrian and auto signage
- Excessive above-ground utility lines
- Unnecessary widening of roads
- A perfect uniformity of bike paths from town to town



He stated that, in his opinion, the greatest loss of a rural roadside view on Martha's Vineyard was at the Tashmoo Overlook in Vineyard Haven, where almost all the above-mentioned "don'ts" can be observed. The loss is saddening.

Of concern is the entire "right of way," the total area of public land dedicated to the road, shoulder and green edge along the road. When roads are designed well, they are a pleasure to travel and to live on. When the design is poor, travelers simply want to get where they are going, and property owners tend to construct fences to shield their land from the road. This, in turn, further degrades the view from the road.



He then presented a series of slides showing examples of classic, bucolic roads that we must work to preserve, because they define Martha's Vineyard as unique and different from other places. Some slides showed delicate Edgartown lanes where rose-covered picket fences come right out to the road's edge. There are no lines painted on the roads. No shoulders. Traffic is forced to move slowly down the narrow, one-way streets. There were also several slides of up-Island, tree-canopied, winding roads with stonewalls and meadows lining both sides of the street. As with the previous slides, there were many lessons to be learned.

Things to be preserved: (Things that say, "Welcome to a Rural Area.")

- Narrow shoulders with vegetation coming right to the edge of the road
- Natural vegetation and native plantings in front of roadside fences
- Low, wooden barriers or low, spaced wooden posts
- As few painted lines as possible

- Meandering bike paths with trees and vegetation separating them from the road
- Low or no curbs
- Use of low, wooden barriers, allowing paths to run close to the road
- Parking deterred by use of *Rosa rugosa* or other native landscaping.
- Irregular clusters of different mailboxes, representing the individuality of their owners
- Sidewalks that meander around trees and mailboxes
- Green islands at intersections with low or no curbs, easy to mow
- Varying street widths, even along a given road
- Minimum use of painted road markings and signage for pedestrian and auto traffic
- Minimal or below-ground utility lines
- Narrow roads (make the attempt to narrow unnecessarily wide roads.)
- Coordinated bike paths from town to town, while still preserving variety between towns



Is the glass half empty or half full on Martha's Vineyard?

Craig Whitaker concluded his remarks by saying that the glass is definitely more than half full. We still have the ability to preserve the look and feel of a rural Vineyard. We need to work collectively to define how to achieve the look we want for our roads and then make sure we follow through on the plan. There is nothing more beautiful than moonlight filtering through a canopy of trees lining a winding country road.



### 3. Panel Discussion

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**Mark London** is the Executive Director for the Martha's Vineyard Commission and also an architect. As the regional planning organization for the Island, the Martha's Vineyard Commission is responsible for transportation planning, in cooperation with the Vineyard Transit Authority and each of the towns. He offered an overview of five areas the Martha's Vineyard Commission is currently working on that relate to roadsides.

Island Road District of Critical Planning Concern (DCPC) - This DCPC was created to outline specific guidelines for development along the Island roads by placing controls on: curb cuts, building heights and setbacks, restrictions on further subdivision. Several possible future changes in the District were mentioned: additional roads; limits on fences and clear-cutting; changes to setbacks, visibility of large buildings.

Developments of Regional Impact (DRI) - A DRI is a project that is deemed to impact more than just the immediate abutters to the project or even one town. A DRI can be proposed by a Board of Selectman, any town board or commission, or by an individual. Numerous DRIs are brought before the Martha's Vineyard Commission every year, many of which impact the Island's roads or roadsides. The Commission considers the impact of a proposal on scenic values as one of the criteria for evaluating projects.

Community Development Plans - The MVC has just completed the process of working with each Island town to complete Community Development Plans. The towns will now use these plans as they work to develop their own process for dealing with the pressures of development, including the increased impacts on roads. One of the factors evaluated was the scenic values along the main Island roads.

Large Transportation Projects - These are projects that involve local town governments as well as state governmental agencies, such as the Mass Highway Department. Several examples of such projects were mentioned: the Lagoon Pond drawbridge, the Sengekontacket Pond bridges, the Oak Bluffs ferry dock.

Cape and Islands Rural Roads Initiative – Several years ago, there was an initiative seeking to prepare a special highway design manual for the Cape and Islands. Subsequently, the Commonwealth decided to prepare a new manual for all of the Commonwealth with special provisions for rural roads. Once this is finalized, the budget earmarked for the Cape and Islands will be used for prototype projects on the Cape and Islands.

Mark London concluded his remarks by reiterating that the Martha's Vineyard Commission is uniquely positioned to help each of the towns with planning for and preserving rural roadsides.

**Larry Mercier**, is now retired after more than twenty years as Highway Supervisor for Edgartown. He is also a former Edgartown Selectman. He spoke as someone who has been on the “front line” when it comes to protecting roadsides. He has worked on roads projects on the Vineyard for many years. In his view, most roads projects boil down to two fundamental issues: a) How much money is a town willing to spend on their highways? and b) What kind of money can they get from the state to help implement their projects?



*Panelists Mark London and Larry Mercier*

He said almost everyone wants lovely, narrow, country roads with tall, old trees growing right to the pavement’s edge. In order to obtain state money today, however, a road must be twenty-four feet wide with twelve-foot lanes, and trees must be cut back away from the road’s edge. Therefore, any new roads built in the classic rural style would need to be funded entirely by local government or through private funding.

Larry Mercier spoke with pride about some of the projects Edgartown was able to complete that seek to preserve the character of rural roadsides.

- Stonewalls along several bike paths
- The round wooden guardrail (with steel backing) along the Edgartown-West Tisbury Road bike path

Concluding his remarks, Larry Mercier said that, while protecting the rural character to our roads may involve a larger outlay of money by local towns, the projects themselves last for many, many years. He has found that, for the most part, people are pleased that the extra effort and money were spent.

## APPENDICIES

### **A1. The View from the Road**

Mark London, Executive Director, Martha's Vineyard Commission

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*This article was originally published in the Martha's Vineyard Times on June 17, 2004 and in the Vineyard Gazette on Jun 18, 2004.*

Our perception of a place depends to a great extent on what we see along the roadside. The main public face of the Vineyard is the view from 177 miles of public road that are the corridors of movement of our daily lives.

The Vineyard has been reasonably successful in protecting the view from the road. Though the population of the Island almost tripled in the past generation, what you see driving, biking or walking along many of the Island's roads is much the same as it was. But there has been significant alteration – many would say deterioration – in the in other locations. If these changes continue, the Island will be very different, looking less like the Vineyard and more like everywhere else.

This dilemma is the focus of the second MVC forum on June 23 – “The View from the Road: How Can We Protect Our Rural Roadsides?” – in the series “Looking at the Vineyard: With an Eye to the Future”, celebrating the Commission's thirtieth anniversary.

The title of the overall series and of this forum come from the important 1973 study that summer resident Kevin Lynch prepared for the Vineyard Open Land Foundation. “The Vineyard roads do much to make up the special Vineyard flavor,” he said. “Built for rural purposes, and for the most part not drastically modified since then, it is their very narrowness, their shifting alignment and rural detail that constantly remind us we are in an unusual locality. The passing views of ocean or pond, marsh, moor or pasture delight us – and the appearance of a few new roadside buildings can make us believe that the entire Island is overbuilt.” He concluded that the Vineyard could absorb additional development provided it was properly located to adapt to the landscape and to limit its visibility.

Preserving the view from the road involves both the publicly owned roadway and the private land alongside.

The seemingly minor details of the roadway design have a big impact on the view. These include the roadway width, the width and materials of shoulders, as well as the presence of vegetation.

Wider shoulders can accommodate pull-off areas for breakdowns, buses, and parking as well as room for bicycles and pedestrians. Narrow shoulders make for the tight visual corridor with trees reaching across to create the cathedral-like green archway that characterizes many of our rural roads. Should we continue to pave shoulders of Island roads for bus lay-bys or for parking or would this erode the present narrow character?

There is a bicycle path alongside many Island roads, and the perceived overall width is affected by how the median strip between the road and bicycle paths is treated. On Beach Road near the Tisbury town dock, the strip is flowering shrubs; on Beach Road in Edgartown, there are wooden rails, thanks to the efforts of the Martha's Vineyard Garden Club. Even though low, these shrubs and rails effectively break up the overall visual roadway width. However, on the Edgartown – Vineyard Haven Road, the median is mostly grass and on much of County Road, the median has been paved over, making it seem like an overly wide road.

Other features related to the edge of the road include signage, reflectors, curbs, sidewalks, and lighting, as well as utility poles and boxes. This morning, I counted 20 signs and reflectors in the stretch of road across from Humphrey's in West Tisbury. In the future, could we deal with traffic and parking without a proliferation of signs and reflectors? If we want to achieve the very worthwhile goal of creating safer pedestrian environments in heavily settled areas, when should we use sidewalks and when should we use pedestrian walkways set back from the road, such as the new walkways in North Tisbury? In the longer term, might we follow the lead of other communities and bury power and telephone lines in the most scenic areas?

Guardrails are both an important safety requirement and a significant visual element in roadside character. Almost all Vineyard guardrails are the standard steel design, not particularly well suited to the Island's special character, though other designs are now available. Recent debate about the replacement of the Sengekontacket Pond inlet bridges and Lagoon Pond drawbridge reflect public concern about the impact of these major structures.

Until recently, there was little room to maneuver when it came to roadway design; the rules in MassHighway's official design manual were pretty rigidly applied. However, the Romney administration has adopted a context-sensitive bridge and highway design policy that should allow for greater flexibility to accept non-standard designs.

The Martha's Vineyard Commission, in conjunction with our sister commissions on the Cape and Nantucket, is about to undertake a Cape and Islands Rural Roads Initiative to look at many of these context- and community-sensitive design issues.

The second area affecting the view from the road is the land alongside or visible from the road. Historically, the Vineyard was made up of a few compact villages linked by country roads passing through fields and woods, each road punctuated with a handful of houses, spaced far apart. Some roads, such as Beach Road and State Road, twist and turn through the landscape, offering ever-changing views; other roads are straight and, frankly, more boring.

Efforts by the Land Bank and private conservation groups to buy fields and other properties alongside major roads have preserved some rural roadsides in their natural state. On other properties, as development takes place in the vicinity of the road, a key question is how visible will it be. A handful of beautiful old houses along a rural road can add interest, but when it becomes dozens or hundreds, it's called sprawl. Even with development, the natural character can

be largely maintained by siting new buildings away from the road and by preserving a dense band of vegetation along the road.

One of the first actions following the creation of the MVC in 1974 was the establishment of the Island Road District of Critical Planning Concern. It was designed to limit strip development by allowing towns to adopt regulations establishing minimum setbacks and maximum building heights near the road, as well as by limiting new curb cuts. Contrary to popular belief, the District does not maintain a no-cut zone along the road because no town has yet adopted regulations to that effect, though they could.

Notwithstanding the DCPC, roadside development is increasingly present. The two new churches outside of Vineyard Haven and the proliferation of home businesses along the road in North Tisbury are transforming the experience of driving from Vineyard Haven to West Tisbury. Once totally rural, it seems increasingly like mainland-style strip development, albeit with shingle-covered buildings and better landscaping. The Edgartown – Vineyard Haven Road has seen a proliferation of highly visible stockade fences. Should we revise regulations to better preserve roadside character, for example by requiring no-cut zones and controlling fencing along rural roads?

Obviously, development has many other impacts besides on scenic values. However, preserving the view from our rural roads is critical to maintaining the character of the Vineyard.

## **A2. Useful Reference Links**

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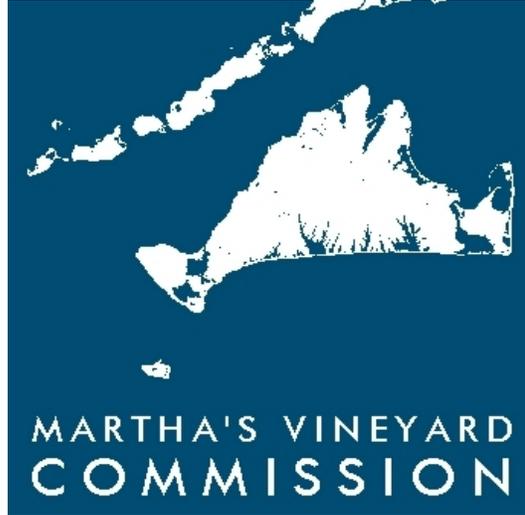
The following websites may be perused for further information on the Martha's Vineyard Commission's transportation planning program, on Michael Van Valkenburgh, on MassHighway, and on planning for rural roads. The "Resources..." site includes much useful information, including many downloadable reports, and links to related sites.

Martha's Vineyard Commission and its transportation planning program:  
[www.mvcommission.org/planning/transportation](http://www.mvcommission.org/planning/transportation)

Michael Van Valkenburgh:  
[www.mvvainc.com](http://www.mvvainc.com)

MassHighway  
[www.mhd.state.ma.us](http://www.mhd.state.ma.us)

Resources for Saving America's Rural (Collector) ROADS and Infrastructure  
(includes a treasury of helpful links)  
[www.raintreecounty.com/savingRd](http://www.raintreecounty.com/savingRd)



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