



Planning the Future of the Vineyard

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The Martha's Vineyard Commission recently endorsed a proposal for the Commission to facilitate a comprehensive Island-wide planning effort, starting in the New Year. Fifteen years after the preparation of the Martha's Vineyard Regional Island Plan, the aim is to help the community renew its vision for the future . . . to figure out where we are, where we want to go, and how we want to get there.

Over the past generation, Martha's Vineyard has preserved its character and environment better than other regions in Massachusetts, even while growing at the second highest rate of any region in the Commonwealth. This is a direct result of strong planning efforts by towns and the Martha's Vineyard Commission. However, the Island's character and environment continue to be threatened by tremendous development pressure. The Island population could grow by 50% if all "available" land was developed under existing zoning, and could more than triple if all seasonal houses became occupied year-round.

Many challenges threaten to seriously impact the Island if not dealt with soon.

- The skyrocketing cost of housing makes it difficult to maintain our diverse community and house essential workers.
- Excessive nitrogen loading in coastal ponds threatens to seriously deteriorate water quality, leading to a decline in our enjoyment of the ponds and affecting the economy, notably tourism and shellfishing.
- Traffic congestion at several intersections is approaching thresholds that could result in dramatic deterioration of conditions with only modest additional traffic.
- Development continues to sprawl into rural areas and along rural roads, undermining scenic values, consuming valuable open space, and damaging environmentally sensitive and highly significant natural resources, all of which are vital to the strength of our visitor-based economy.

In 2004, all six Vineyard towns prepared Community Development Plans, with the assistance of the Martha's Vineyard Commission, a useful preliminary analysis of the suitability of different parts of the Island for various land uses. Each of these plans called for a comprehensive Island-wide planning effort as a logical next step.

The aim is to define and share a consensus about how to manage growth while maintaining the Vineyard's distinct community character and natural environment. It should also set out the strategy for achieving this vision by outlining possible regulations, programs and other actions that could be carried out by the Martha's Vineyard Commission, by the towns, and by other entities.

The proposed planning program will deal with the interrelation between the broad spectrum of issues facing the community while focusing on priority issues, such as affordable housing and water quality. Two basic scenarios for future growth will be examined. The first is a projection of current trends under existing zoning. The second is the possibility of greater application of Smart Growth principles, namely concentration of growth in compact, walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods (down-Island towns and various village areas) with maximum preservation of open space.

The resulting plan would be adopted by the Martha's Vineyard Commission as the official regional plan. A major goal would be to serve the towns that ultimately would be responsible for implementing many of its ideas, by helping analyze problems, by identifying possible solutions, and by providing information so that decision-makers can act. Although adoption of the plan would not be subject to town votes and would not be binding on the towns, its success would depend on ensuring that it reflects the opinions of the people and leaders of each town. The information will also help towns plan appropriately sized public facilities, and Island help businesses prepare for the future.

Considerable planning work has taken place over the past decades at the Commission, in towns, and within various agencies. The new plan will build on this work by pulling it together into a comprehensive framework. The planning effort will focus largely on land use issues, but also touch on other factors contributing to the make-up of our community. A preliminary list of topics is: Growth Management (land use, location of future development, rate of growth), Housing (affordable and market, seasonal workers), Economic Development (commercial and industrial development, tourism, fishing and agriculture), Open Space and Natural Resources (habitat, coastal management), Cultural Resources (scenic values, historic preservation, archeology), Water Quality (wastewater and stormwater management; drinking water), Transportation (roads and traffic, public transit, bicycles, walkability), and Public Services / Infrastructure (public facilities, taxes and equity, energy, solid waste, emergency preparedness).

We will start out by preparing a brief background document for each topic that summarizes the historic and geographic context, the current situation, what the future likely holds if current trends continue, the key issues we face, and the best practices of how similar communities have dealt with similar issues.

In most cases, the information is readily available but for some issues, additional research will be required. Also, the MVC has begun to prepare computer models to help analyze the impact of various possible growth scenarios on resources such as traffic and water quality, in order to identify the optimum locations for future development.

The first product of this process will be a Comprehensive Policy Plan that outlines the goals, objectives and policies for future development and conservation on the Vineyard. This will be based on the 1991 Regional Island Plan, and various town plans, with updating and re-editing as required. Among other purposes, this document will be used by the MVC and MEMA in project review.

The second product will be a Strategic Action Plan, a series of documents that outline specific actions to implement the orientations in

the Comprehensive Policy Plan, most to occur within a five-year time frame.

The third product will be MVC Guidelines, developed by the MVC for use in reviewing Developments of Regional Impact.

The process will be designed to favor maximum involvement in the process and ownership of the results by town governments, by community organizations, and by the general public. Using a wide variety of techniques, especially visualization of options and impacts, will appeal to a broad cross-section of the community.

Early in 2005, we propose to create a Steering Committee of about 15 people to oversee the process and deal with the trade-offs between different topics; it should include some Commissioners, representatives of each town, representatives from other organizations, and individual citizens. Later next year, a task force would be created for each topic.

Some techniques to encourage community participation include an initial visioning "charette", a series of newspapers articles by various people dealing with their views of the future of the Vineyard, public meetings, workshops, visioning sessions, and public forums. A Visual Preference Survey would have a variety of people take photos to identify the best and worst of the Vineyard; the results would then be used to catalyze discussion on how to preserve and get more of 'the best', while avoiding further examples of 'the worst'.

The entire process should take about three years, with the highly public parts concentrated into a maximum of two years, starting next fall. The staff of the Martha's Vineyard Commission will do most of the work, with specialized expertise and assistance brought in as required. The relatively limited additional costs beyond basic MVC operations will be funded from grants, private sector contributions, and town assessments.

Commission representatives will be meeting Boards of Selectmen and other town boards in January to discuss this initiative and get their input about the process before the details are finalized.