

Lots of shots
Vaccine demand wanes. **A7**

Mother knows best
Nancy Slonim Aronie writes about her amazing mom. **B1**

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Sticking around for the season

An osprey returns to its perch at Felix Neck with another stick for a nest.

JEREMY DRIESEN

Coalition outlines housing bank

In its first public listening session, members of the Coalition to Create the Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank gave a presentation on their "first draft parameters" to more than 140 attendees via Zoom, and fielded wide-ranging questions from the public.

The listening session featured members of the coalition as well as speakers from various Island organizations. "We need a comprehensive regional solution with long-range planning and funding appropriate to the scale of the problem," coalition steering committee co-chair Julie Fay said.

The coalition is the third attempt at a housing bank on Martha's Vineyard, and comes amid a growing affordable housing crisis on the Island. The first endeavor in 2005 struck an agreement with all six Island towns and many Island real estate agents, but was shot down by the state legislature when the Massachusetts Association of Realtors lobbied against it. The second attempt came in 2019, following the expanded rooms excise tax on rentals such as Airbnb and VRBO. That proposal asked for 50 percent of the new revenue generated by the tax, but was swiftly dismissed by select board members across the Island before being defeated by five towns at annual town meetings. West Tisbury approved the 2018 effort, but then

Continued on A15

Islanders testify for Fernandes' forest bill

Onsite superintendent seen as a hedge against fire. **BY RICH SALTZBERG**

Vineyard officials joined Rep. Dylan Fernandes, D-Falmouth, before the Massachusetts legislature's Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture on Tuesday afternoon in support of a bill that would provide state employee housing in the State Forest.

Sponsored by Fernandes, the bill would permit use of an already existing dwelling inside the forest boundaries to serve as the residence for the Manuel F. Correllus State Forest superintendent and other forest staffers. Christine Todd, chair of the Dukes County Commissioners, Dukes County commissioner Tristan Israel, Martha's Vineyard Commission special projects planner Dan Doyle, and Friends of the Correl-

Continued on A15

MVRHS welcomes back most students

Majority of school population is back in person; seniors look toward graduation. **BY LUCAS THORS**

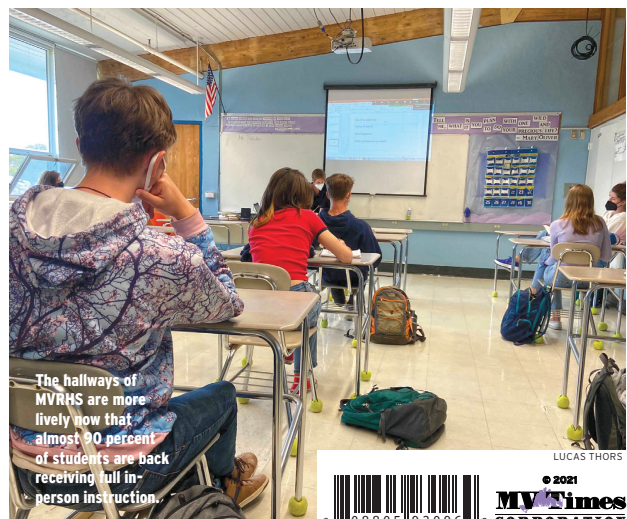
The hallways and classrooms of Martha's Vineyard Regional High School (MVRHS) are more lively these days, now that around 90 percent of students have transitioned back to in-person instruction as of Monday, April 26.

When the COVID pandemic forced schools to shut down entirely and resort to remote learning, the high school worked to determine a plan for partial, and eventually full, reopening.

Beginning by implementing pool testing within the general student population, officials worked to establish safeguards that would allow for a hybrid model, where students were separated into cohorts. At that point, about 25 percent of the student population was opting for all remote learning.

After a mandate by Massachusetts Education Commissioner Jeff Riley required schools to work toward getting back to full

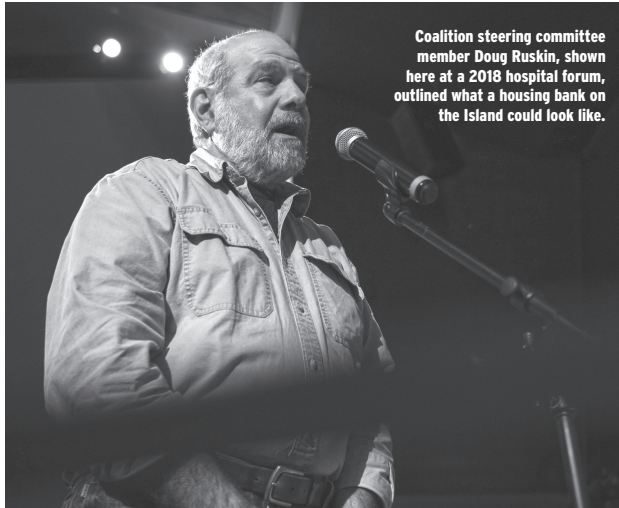
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The hallways of MVRHS are more lively now that almost 90 percent of students are back receiving full in-person instruction.

LUCAS THORS

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Coalition steering committee member Doug Ruskin, shown here at a 2018 hospital forum, outlined what a housing bank on the Island could look like.

GABRIELLE MANNINO

Coalition outlines housing bank

Continued from A1

rescinded its vote to send it to committee.

Steering committee member Doug Ruskin said the coalition has been working with a subcommittee and its steering committee to flesh out the parameters of what a future housing bank could look like.

While nothing is set in stone, Ruskin said, the coalition sees a future housing bank being modeled after the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank. The governance would consist of seven commissioners — one elected member from each town, plus a state appointee.

There would also be six community advisory boards, one from each

town, with seven appointed members from the select boards, conservation commissions, affordable housing committees, health departments, planning boards, and zoning boards.

Housing bank governance would review proposals from organizations, individuals, and public entities to make sure they meet requirements and serve all types of applicants.

“The key here is the advisory boards would have veto power over any projects,” Ruskin said. “While the central body of commissioners would be vetting proposals, nothing would happen in a particular town without the advisory board’s OK.”

The housing bank could receive proposals; provide funding for housing infrastructure; provide shared-appreciation equity loans; and purchase, receive, hold, lease, grant, and sell property.

Any housing bank-funded project would have to be deed-restricted to be occupied year-round and at a specific income level. Properties would also pay their share of property taxes.

To keep the overhead low, the Land Bank has agreed to do the administrative work associated with fee collections, should a housing bank be established.

The focus would be on previously developed properties, projects that mitigate climate change, and projects that have state-of-the-art wastewater systems.

The funding mecha-

nism would consist of a 2 percent transfer fee paid by the buyer, same as the Land Bank, but only on all dollars above \$1 million — a home purchased for \$999,999 would be exempt from the fee, while a home purchased for \$1.2 million would be taxed 2 percent on \$200,000. Coalition campaign coordinator Laura Silber said it could create an up to \$10 million annual revenue stream. The proposed housing bank would also revisit its exemption threshold every five years.

The housing bank would not develop, remodel, rehabilitate, or maintain property — specialty services Ruskin said are widely available on the Island.

“[The housing bank] would also not fund any project that isn’t restricted to year-round occupancy,” Ruskin said.

Land Bank executive director James Lengyel said if a housing bank is created, the Land Bank could purchase property jointly with the housing bank, or the Land Bank could work with another entity and have the housing bank fund the purchase — creating more opportunities for housing.

“I would imagine what we’re doing right now would continue; there would just be more fruitfulness,” Lengyel said.

Hospital CEO Denise Schepici gave her endorsement to the coalition, and said hospital employees, especially physicians and nurses, who make higher salaries, are always shocked at the prices of homes on the Island. “We are so commit-

ted to working with all of you to make this work, and I praise the efforts of this consortium and all the leadership that has pulled this together,” Schepici said.

MVC executive director Adam Turner said there is a significant need for seasonal workforce housing outlined in all the Island’s housing production plans (HPP). He said the MVC is going to create a seasonal workforce housing taskforce.

“It’s got to happen,” Turner said of the housing bank. “If it doesn’t happen, it’s going to really hurt this place that we call home.”

In addition to support from organization leaders, Monday’s Zoom chat was filled with comments of praise and support from the public.

“The goal here is to do more, and in order to do more, we need more money,” Ruskin said. “Our big focus is a mechanism to bring significant money in.”

There are several bills at the state legislature that deal with a transfer fee: S.868, H.1377, H.2895, and S.873. The bills will change as they move through the legislature, but the coalition is working with Nantucket to request amendments that will suit the needs of the islands.

Ruskin said there are lots of people with higher incomes who still can’t buy a home on the Vineyard, which is leading the coalition to propose a higher limit on area median income (AMI) — as high as 240 percent. But Ruskin assured the meeting that there would be fewer projects for those

with higher incomes, and many more for those at the lower end. This would give the housing bank the opportunity to expand service as median home prices increase.

Each proposed bill is raising the area median income to 175 percent. Silber said Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard have both joined to ask that the islands be allowed to go up to 240 percent AMI — which is based on a current Massachusetts General Law that allows the islands to go 70 percentage points higher than the rest of the commonwealth.

Locally, the coalition is looking to bring a housing bank to a vote in each of the Island towns at 2022 annual town meetings. The legislative process at the state level could take much longer.

Kaylea Moore, Island liaison for state Rep. Dylan Fernandes, D-Falmouth, said some iteration of a transfer fee legislation has been filed for the past 20 years.

“There really is no timeline,” Moore said. “Some more towns are taking interest in it, but there are no guarantees.”

John Abrams said the coalition’s “biggest lift” will be at the state level, and could take years. “The coalition has felt from the beginning that this is a long-haul effort, and as long as it takes, we’ll be at it,” Abrams said.

Those who want to get involved can go to the coalition’s website and scroll to the bottom of the page to sign up for information alerts, join the coalition council, and share your housing story. **mv**

Islanders testify for Fernandes’ forest bill

Continued from A1

lus State Forest co-chair Bob Woodruff gave oral testimony to the committee.

Woodruff told the committee the forest comprises 40 percent of the Vineyard’s landmass, yet has nobody living on it to help protect it. Woodruff pointed out the present superintendent, Conor Laffey, commutes daily to the Vineyard, as does Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) fire-fighter Karen Lothrop.

Woodruff said no state staffers are present in the forest during off hours, and are not available on short notice during those periods — a period fire could strike.

Woodruff noted the dwelling housed state staff in the past, and is sorely needed, given the high cost of housing on the Vineyard.

“The Friends of Correllus urges you to pass H. 909 to help the forest attract excellence in staffing,” he said, “whether temporary or permanent, and if possible, we suggest the act become available immediately upon passage. Further, we urge that

you make reasonable restrictions on the compensatory rent that DCR staffers would have to pay.”

Todd stressed the threat of wildfire has significantly increased on the Vineyard, and the threat demands forest staffers be onsite. “Here we have a property that’s sitting vacant,” she said.

Israel said for fire safety and for tourists’ safety in the forest, “having full-time management — somebody on the ground in a place that’s already there — I think is so important.”

Doyle said DCR “often plays a central role” in the coordinated fire response Vineyard fire departments make on fires within the borders and outskirts of the forest. He pointed to recent brush fires that had proved “persistent” as a reminder of that coordination, which makes the difference in extinguishing them. With that in mind, he said, DCR and its staff having one foot off-Island and one foot on Island, firewise, “just has its limitations.”

In a letter to the committee, Edgartown Fire Chief Alex Schaeffer wrote that all the Vineyard’s fire chiefs are concerned about turnover of the first superintendent position.

without a [resolution],” Schaeffer wrote. “I am concerned that the capital investments made toward wildfire risk reduction within the state park will be lost without the consistent management only a committed long term manager can accomplish.”

Fernandes told the commit-

tee to afford higher home costs, but it’s simply unattainable for folks working with a state salary through [DCR],” Fernandes said. “So we really need housing on the Vineyard for this superintendent. It’s becoming an urgent need. The position had gone unfilled for years and before

This is a huge forest and fire risks are increasing year after year as climate change becomes more pronounced.”

Fernandes also pointed to illegal camping as a growing risk for fire.

“This seems like a really simple solution to a very challenging problem,” Fer-



“In March 2018, the Dukes County fire chiefs wrote to DCR to advocate for the house to be used to retain one of the many hires we have seen over the past years

tee the average home price on the Vineyard last year was \$1.5 million.

“I would love it if we paid our public servants and state employees enough to be able

that three superintendents had gone through in a very short period of time. I think over a course of four years. So incredible turnover. And it’s becoming a growing risk.

nandes said.

The committee didn’t have questions for those who testified. It’s expected to take up the bill in the coming weeks. **mv**