

EDITORIAL

A promising start

The Coalition to Create a Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank recently held two listening sessions. That alone sets it apart from the failed venture to create a housing bank several years ago.

We've been impressed by the careful and thoughtful approach of this coalition. The effort is focused on state legislation that would allow for housing banks to be created and use a transfer fee, similar to the one that funds the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank. The coalition is working with communities such as Nantucket, with similar goals.

We like the transfer fee approach because it doesn't create a battle over tax revenue. We also like that the housing bank is working with the Land Bank to limit the amount of administrative overhead to the housing bank.

It comes at a time when the housing market is out of control. Prices have skyrocketed during the pandemic, and there aren't a lot of houses on the market, which is pushing the prices even higher. All of which contributes to pushing the American dream of home ownership out of the reach of too many Islanders. According to a Housing Needs Assessment report done by the Martha's Vineyard Commission in 2020, the gap has grown between what a family on the Island can afford since its last study in 2012. The median household income for Oak Bluffs is \$75,294, putting an affordable home at \$400,000. However, the median home price in Oak Bluffs was \$1.1 million. For the entire county, the disparity is even more staggering. The median household income is \$71,811 and

the median house price is closer to \$1.2 million as of November 2020.

"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, former executive director of M.V. Community Services, said during one of the listening sessions for the housing bank.

Having someone of Fay's calibre at the helm is another positive for this initiative. She's well respected, but more important, she knows how to get things done.

So what can you do?

There are bills before the state Legislature — H1377, S868, and H2895. While both state Sen. Julian Cyr, D-Truro, and state Rep. Dylan Fernandes, D-Falmouth, support the initiative, it's important that Islanders let other legislators know how important this effort is to them. You can find a list of their emails at malegislature.gov/Legislators/Members/Senate and malegislature.gov/Legislators/Members/House.

The funding mechanism would consist of a 2 percent transfer fee paid by the buyer, the same as the Land Bank. The fee would be paid on any amount over \$1 million. For example, a home purchased for \$999,999 would be exempt from the fee, while a home purchased for \$1.2 million would pay 2 percent on \$200,000. Coalition campaign coordinator Laura Silber said at a recent listening session that this legislation could create up to \$10 million in annual revenue. The proposed housing bank would also revisit its exemption threshold every five years.

And while it's not set in stone, the housing

bank would operate similarly to the Land Bank, with commissioners from each community and an advisory board in each Island town.

This legislation to set up a housing bank is a step in the right direction to address the Island's affordable housing crisis, but it won't solve the problem alone.

As last week's town meeting in West Tisbury illustrates, there are other hurdles besides money to building affordable housing on the Island. Though the article to transfer property from the town to the affordable housing committee at 401 State Road ultimately won approval by the necessary two-thirds majority, there was a fair amount of NIMBYism to overcome during the hourlong discussion.

And as Island Housing Trust — the largest developer of affordable and workforce housing on the Vineyard — can attest, there is NIMBYism each time a project is proposed on the Island.

Perhaps having a housing bank in place and getting more of these projects funded and approved will help to educate the community about the need and the positive effects that they can have on the Island. What's at stake is not having homes for police officers, firefighters, teachers, nurses, and others so vital to keeping our community functioning.

This isn't just about building new homes. It's about taking money to convert existing homes into affordable rental units, and providing down payments for people looking to buy. It's about creating opportunities and stability.

The housing bank concept moves the needle in the positive direction. We need to keep pushing forward.

LETTERS

Poor Martha

To the Editor:

It is an expression we have heard in the past, and one we will no doubt be hearing in the future. But right now it has a new, raw presence in the mundane rhythm of daily life, as we return back to "normal" after a year of living quietly under the radar. Over the course of this lockdown, it appears that the Island population has become embroiled in debate over the whats, whys, and where-fors of affordable housing.

It finally found its forum at the Tabernacle last Tuesday night, during the annual West Tisbury town meeting. A three-acre lot on the corner of Upper Lamberts Cove Road was placed into the hands of the West Tisbury affordable housing committee — a committee spearheaded by zealous relative newcomers to the island, who believe their cause to be most noble. This vote was a clear victory, which, while making a very small dent in the insatiable need for affordable housing, at the same time illuminated the painful realization that our rural highways and byways will now be unceremoniously sacrificed to the cause. Slash and dash.

Poor Martha.

Cathy Weiss
West Tisbury

Voters did the right thing

To the Editors:

I am writing to thank the West Tisbury voters for passing, with a bit more than the required two-thirds majority, the warrant article that designates the town-owned parcel of land at 401 State Road for affordable housing.

Last week's town meeting was truly the very best of democracy. Moderator Dan Waters ensured that all voices were heard — pro and con, respectfully. And they were heard for almost 45 minutes. The crowd, well over 200 people when the meeting began, included many West Tisbury residents who rarely if ever attend town meetings. And there often was applause. And then we voted — 153 in favor,

versus 57 opposed.

Now the work begins to design the development — many decisions will be informed by public input through the affordable housing committee and select board meetings.

Thank you, West Tisbury.

Susan Silk
West Tisbury

Silk is a member at large of the affordable housing committee. -Ed.

When the streets had no names

To the Editor:

The people who lived on Motts Hill, Dr. Fisher, and Hopps Farm roads knew how to get home, but strangers would never find them. Before the Internet came along, few of West Tisbury's roads had signs to mark them. The oldest records at the County Registry of Deeds often described property locations with phrases such as "Turn left by the old oak tree next to the ant hill," or "Go right at the big rock after the grove of beech trees." The attitude had that old Yankee codger sentiment: If you don't know where you're going, you probably

shouldn't be here. It was Art Buchwald who told his readers he would not accept a party invitation that came with a map.

When I worked for the West Tisbury planning board in the '90s, one of my more interesting assignments was to see that every dirt road and driveway that led to three or more properties had an official address. The '70s and '80s were boom times for real estate development, and quite a few new roads as well as old roads did not have names. To make way for the new technology that was about to change the world, Island towns were asked (by the telephone companies, we were told) to make sure every structure and every vacant lot had a street name and number. Our map and lot numbers would not fit into the World Wide Web.

The M.V. Commission did the numbering; the planning board did the names.

So we contacted the owners of properties along these roads, asking them to meet with their neighbors and agree to a street name. In a few cases, one family owned all the land along the road, and provided a reasonable answer. Surprisingly, few people named the street after themselves, which they could have done;

such modesty was impressive. Some squabbled and disagreed, and let us know which neighbors were being difficult, but we persisted. Some decided to compile a series of initials of their names to create an unpronounceable conglomerate of gobbledygook. Road associations were helpful in moving the project along.

Property owners on these private roads were also required to install signs at the intersections so that Art Buchwald wouldn't need a map when he came to call. Most West Tisbury groups ordered official-looking green and white aluminum signs. Chilmark was the town that went for artistic and creative road signs, bless 'em. Sadly, a number of signs were stolen, including one installed by my late in-laws. About 30 years later, Police Officer Skipper Manter came to our door to return the Sweet William Way sign from my in-laws' road. He didn't tell us the story of its rescue. We hope, at least, that the guilty party was named William.

Many people know that Music Street was named for the pianos so stylishly purchased by the prosperous whaling captains who built homes there during the late years of the 19th century. Less well known is the street's former name — Cow Plop Lane. We had friends in New York State who had built the first house on a new street in a new development. They didn't like the name chosen by the developer, and they asked their town fathers if they could change its name to Music Street. The town officials replied that the couple might change their street name to Melody Lane.

Never mind, said our friends.

Eileen Maley
West Tisbury

Turkington misses the mark

To the Editor:

I write with concerns about the commentary in the Falmouth Enterprise by our former state representative, Eric Turkington. He belittles the efforts of his community's care about growing

What you're saying online

A bill proposed by state Sen. Julian Cyr, D-Truro, that would charge \$1,000 fees for landing at airports is getting some significant pushback.

Bob Murphy: "Cyr has got to go; someone please run against this guy when his term is up. Talk about out of touch with the district he is supposed to represent — this guy has no clue."

Carla Cooper: "Senator Cyr has done so much great work for our district. I'm against this bill,

but I'm not stringing him up because I have one issue I disagree with. I will voice my opposition to this bill, but I am putting it in perspective with all the other great work he's done."

Richard Knabel: "Apparently, some part of the motivation for this ill-considered legislation, according to an aide to Senator Cyr, was to stop the 'millionaires and billionaires from flying their private jets at will,' and having a big carbon footprint."

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