

Listen to the voters

By **The Martha's Vineyard Times** - December 15, 2021

Town meetings are often referred to as the purest form of democracy. Unlike a presidential election where your one vote is counted among millions and, in a blue state like Massachusetts, doesn't do much to change the outcome, a vote at a town meeting could be the difference between your town buying a new fire truck or soldiering through with the trucks they have for another year.

Recently, opponents of a plan to replace diagonal parking spaces for parallel parking spaces on Circuit Ave. as part of a streetscapes plan packed a special town meeting in Oak Bluffs. They were drawn there by a petitioned article that called for the plan to be delayed and put to a townwide vote. But it wasn't until they got to the meeting hall that the town's attorney told the crowd that any vote would be nonbinding. Voters cannot force the select board to put the question before voters on a ballot, the town's attorney said.

The deliberations went ahead anyway, and voters were overwhelmingly in favor of the petitioned article. In fact, a straw poll of those in attendance demonstrated that support.

After the meeting we asked select board member Brian Packish if the select board would meet with the concerned residents. He said they would, but that didn't happen.

A week later, the select board moved forward with awarding a contract for the changes on Circuit Ave. in a 3-2 vote, and work on that project begins this week.

It was the ultimate thumbing of the nose at the voters.

That's not how to encourage public engagement in town government.

The streetscapes plan may eventually work at improving the pedestrian experience in Oak Bluffs, and all the worries about parallel parking versus diagonal parking may turn out to be just bluster. But the way it was handled is likely to leave a lingering bad taste in the mouths of those who feel their voices weren't heard.

It's a good lesson to town leaders that when the public speaks out, they should at least listen and do a better job of creating buy-in to a project.

That brings us to the Coalition to Create the Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank, which has been making the rounds to Island select boards pitching an article for spring town meeting, with mixed results.

While the Aquinnah and Chilmark boards seem to understand they're just putting an article on the warrant as a placeholder, and not taking a position on the overall language of the housing bank, Edgartown and West Tisbury have delayed putting the article on their warrants — waiting for the coalition to answer specific questions raised by town counsel Ron Rappaport.

It's good that some of these issues are being raised and addressed ahead of the town meetings, but Edgartown — and particularly select board member Margaret Serpa — seems to want it all buttoned up before they put it on the warrant. That's not necessary.

Indeed, these select boards, and all select board members on the Island, should be playing a leadership role in making sure that not only does the housing bank get to voters, but that it gets to them in a way that they can get behind and fully support.

For too long, the Island's leadership has sat back and waited for a solution to be brought to them. We were encouraged that so many of the stakeholders, including some select board members, were involved in the preplanning stages when this iteration of the housing bank was launched.

Let's get the housing bank article on all the warrants, tweak whatever language needs to get tweaked, continue to lobby the state legislature to approve the bills that would allow a transfer fee on home sales to fund the housing bank, and get on with solving the Island's housing crisis.

Enough time has been wasted.
