



Edgartown select board had more questions Monday about the draft housing bank article now circulating in Island towns.

More Details Debated on Draft Housing Bank Article

Zach Harris Tuesday, December 28, 2021 - 4:55pm

A revised version of a draft article to create an Island housing bank came before the Edgartown select board Monday, but the board delayed a vote again on placing the article on the annual town meeting warrant, amid ongoing debate about the details.

“We all know how important it is. There’s no question about it. It’s going to fly, everybody wants it. So it’s just a matter of getting it right,” selectman Michael Donaroma told members of the coalition to create a housing bank who attended the online meeting. “You guys are going to be handling millions of dollars and people are going to want to know every little detail. And so we’re trying to be cautious.”

The coalition is asking all six towns to put the draft article on their annual town meetings warrants in the spring. Modeled after the land bank, the proposal calls for creating a housing bank fund using a two per cent transfer fee on some real estate transactions. An elected housing bank commission would control the funds in concert with appointed town advisory boards.

Chilmark, Aquinnah and Tisbury have already agreed to put the draft article on their warrants, but Edgartown, Oak Bluffs and West Tisbury have said they want more fine tuning of the densely-worded article. Coalition members have been meeting with Edgartown town counsel Ron Rappaport, after he wrote an opinion on the draft last month.

Some changes have been made, and a new draft is now circulating.

On Monday, Edgartown selectmen had more questions, including about the electoral process for passage of the housing bank, provisions for member towns to withdraw from the bank, the role of the town advisory boards and the question of stipends for elected housing bank commissioners.

In the revised draft, a provision has been added requiring passage of on both the town meeting floor and in the ballot box.

Member towns could withdraw from the housing bank after 10 years through a majority town ballot vote. The 10-year period allows time to see what the housing bank looks like operating at full capacity, since it will take a few years to get it up and running, coalition coordinator Laura Silber said.

But selectman Arthur Smadbeck said towns should be able to opt out whenever they want.

“To restrict them to 10 years is quite onerous . . . no one is going to go in one year and then out the next anyway, practically speaking,” Mr. Smadbeck said. “I think it’s a good sales point for people, [to say] ‘look if you don’t like it, you can opt out of it.’”

The question of stipends for commission members remains a sticking point.

Commissioners would be paid stipends with approval by every member town in order “to align with local diversity, equity and inclusion goals,” according to the draft article. A modest stipend would allow a broader range of people to serve as commissioners because they could use the money to cover expenses incurred from participation, like child care, coalition member John Abrams said.

Mr. Smadbeck pushed back at the stipend idea.

Public money should be going to affordable housing and not elected commissioners, he said, noting that other regional commissioners such as land bank, Martha’s Vineyard and Dukes County commissioners are not paid.

“I don’t think, one, it’s necessary, and, two, it’s right,” Mr. Smadbeck said. “[Commissioners] have a fiduciary responsibility to make sure that these funds are handled appropriately.”

Others who attended the meeting backed the idea of stipends.

“We have an issue on this Island when it comes to representation and the people that need to be represented when it comes to affordable housing do not have the luxury and the time because we’re working,” said Kat Monterosso. “We need to remove any minor barrier, if that is \$50 for a babysitter so that somebody who actually lives this can have their voice heard, we need to do that no questions asked.”

The select board asked the coalition to continue to work with Mr. Rappaport to iron out more details, and will take up the draft article at their next meeting, Jan. 3.

The Oak Bluffs select board was due to discuss the new draft at a meeting Tuesday.

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