

# Stipends would attract diverse commissioners

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To the Editor:

At Monday's Edgartown select board meeting, I was dismayed to see Edgartown select board members refuse to consider stipends for members of the future housing bank commission. The housing bank warrant article, as currently proposed, doesn't even mandate the stipend — it provides the option for the town advisory boards (TABs) to institute them should they deem them necessary to lowering barriers to participation on the commission. As described in the warrant article, the TABs could specify these funds for participation-related expenses such as childcare, transportation to and from meetings if needed, and tech access.

Serving on a board or commission entails a serious time commitment, as well as personal funds for the related expenses described above. There has been a long lament on the Island that we don't have enough younger community members, or members of color, serving in local government. Those that have the spare time on their hands and the financial cushion to serve are disproportionately white, male, older, and financially comfortable. At what point do we stop lamenting and take some logical steps to make that possible? Stipends make it easier for folks from historically marginalized populations to serve.

Especially for a board like this, where the decisions have real-life implications for these populations, we should do everything within our power to ensure diverse representation in terms of race, age, gender, and economic status. With the need for affordable housing concentrated in communities that look very different from the current makeup of most Island boards, it is essential that those who are best equipped to advocate for these communities — those themselves in need of housing — are able to serve. That point was well made by a sizable number of Islanders who spoke in support of a potential stipend at the meeting.

It was particularly galling to see the Edgartown select board — a board made up of three older white people — hold up the placing of this article on the town warrant over this provision. One of the select board members calling stipends “unseemly” is all the more vexing because they themselves make \$4,500 a year each to serve, far more than any of the potential stipends discussed on Monday.

The housing bank has the potential to solve our Island's foremost problem: a lack of affordable housing. What makes me so optimistic about this

solution is that the communities most affected by the problem could have a say in how the money is allocated. But in order to elevate those voices, we have to make sure that they are able to serve as commissioners. And providing an option for a stipend would go a long way to ensuring they can, and set the stage for other governmental bodies on Martha's Vineyard to look at how they can also reduce barriers to participation.

Keith Chatinover  
Edgartown

*Chatinover is a member of the Dukes County  
Commission. -Ed.*