

Encourage more volunteers

By **The Martha's Vineyard Times** - January 5, 2022

We're always struck by the number of people who give of themselves to make their communities a better place to live. Four years ago we started a tradition of highlighting some of those volunteers during the holiday season. It's always uplifting to introduce you to neighbors who are making a difference, and for us to learn the reasons behind their volunteer efforts.

For example, Lynne Whiting gives her time because she's not in a position to help Island nonprofits with money. "One reason I volunteer is that I can't write big checks," Whiting told our reporter. "I guess my mantra might be something like, 'If you can't give money, give time ... talents, or whatever you can.'" And Ilona Metell told us that it's rewarding to help someone who needs a meal or clothing because he or she has fallen on tough times. "It's nice to remember that you can always help the person next door whenever you want," she said.

If you look at the Island's elected boards and commissions, you can't help but notice the lack of young people engaged and involved. Boards are dominated by older citizens, many of them retired. They don't have to worry about babysitters or the work-volunteer balance.

We often hear people say that boards and committees need new and younger voices, but what are we doing to attract them?

Recently, the proposed housing bank has generated a discussion about volunteers for the commission that would govern it, and whether they should receive a modest stipend for their work.

Proponents of the stipends say providing a small amount of money for the volunteer commission would allow for a more diverse cross-section of the community to sign up and be a part of this affordable housing initiative — mothers or fathers who need to hire a babysitter to attend a meeting, or perhaps a young adult who needs to take a night off from a restaurant shift to attend a meeting, but can't afford to miss out on the money entirely because he or she is a service worker.

We were surprised to hear Edgartown select board member Arthur Smadbeck's staunch opposition to stipends for housing bank commissioners. "Land Bank commissioners aren't paid; in fact, to my knowledge no regional body commissioners are paid. I really don't like that,"

Smadbeck said. “I don’t like taking the public money and paying the people who are going to determine for themselves what they’re going to get paid. It’s bad.”

Later he said the objectives of the housing bank are to create affordable housing, not to create jobs. The stipend being floated for the housing bank commissioners is \$2,500 per year. That doesn’t seem like an unreasonable amount to us, and, certainly, can’t be considered a job. (We should note that it would be left up to the advisory committees whether commissioners would get a stipend under the proposal on the table, which the Edgartown board had dragged its feet about putting on the town meeting warrant until Tuesday.)

We typically find Smadbeck to be reasonable and thoughtful, but his comments about housing bank stipends were surprising — the irony of all ironies being that Smadbeck receives a stipend as a member of the Edgartown select board that’s greater than what’s proposed for the housing bank commissioners, and is eligible for town health insurance.

In a Letter to the Editor, Keith Chatinover, the youngest serving elected official on the Island, who balances his college attendance with participating in virtual Dukes County Commission meetings, said it well. “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,” he wrote. “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.”

Chatinover was not the only one to make this point. Others at the Edgartown select board meeting made similar points about diversifying the voices of Island leadership.

Elected officials like Smadbeck and the rest of the Vineyard’s select board contingent would do well to listen to their constituents. They want a housing bank, and some of them want to serve. Let’s make it happen. Stipends would be a small price to pay.