



West Tisbury town meeting drew an overflow crowd Tuesday with a turnout of 372 voters. *Albert O. Fischer*

After Key Win at Town Meetings, Housing Bank Coalition Turns Attention to Elections

Julia Wells Tuesday, April 12, 2022 - 6:32pm

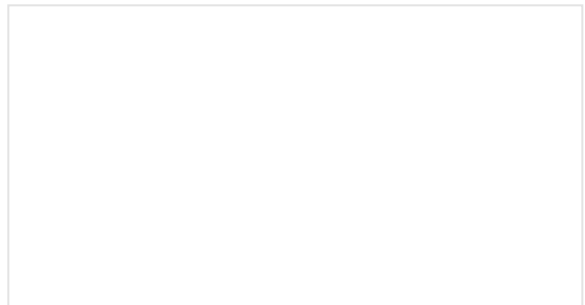
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Buoyed by the outcome Tuesday night when four Island towns voted their overwhelming support for a housing bank for Martha's Vineyard, on Wednesday the coalition that has led the campaign to create the housing bank was already looking to the next steps.

“We’re feeling really grateful to the community and really pleased with the voter turnout and with the engagement and all the support,” coalition coordinator Laura Silber told the Gazette by phone.

The town meeting votes still hinge on approval in the ballot box.

Edgartown, Oak Bluffs and West Tisbury hold their elections tomorrow. The Tisbury election is May 24.



“I would say [I’m] pleased, but absolutely not complacent,” Ms. Silber said. “It doesn’t go through until the ballot votes happen, but I was really delighted with the support last night.”

If the initiative wins approval in at least four of the six Vineyard towns, it can go to the state legislature as a home rule petition.

“This is a fantastic first step. It’s a huge first step,” Ms. Silber said. “The fact that the votes were so overwhelming in all of the towns was really extraordinary. Honestly I can’t remember the last time something like that happened.”

The overwhelming support speaks to all the outreach the coalition did, she said.

“We’ve done dozens and dozens of meetings with the towns that have all been open public meetings that are all on public record so that the community can access any part of this process and we’ll continue to do that going forward,” she said.

She also said the wide voting margins are important because state lawmakers take community support into account when considering legislation.

“The fact that these votes were so overwhelming is going to make a big difference at the legislature as they’re considering the Vineyard support for a transfer fee,” Ms. Silber said. “I think that the votes last night sent a really, really strong message to the legislature and I hope that the ballot votes will confirm that and send the same kind of message.”

Chilmark and Aquinnah hold their town meetings and elections later this month and in early May.

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The housing bank would establish a new regional government entity funded by a two per cent transfer fee on most real estate transactions over \$1 million. The money would be used to expand and develop more affordable housing on the Vineyard through grants and loans from the housing bank.

On Tuesday night, the debate was passionate on all sides, beginning in West Tisbury, where an overflow crowd of voters turned out.



Old Whaling Church was the stage for Edgartown meeting. — *Larry Glick*

“All we are doing tonight is starting the process, it gives us a seat at the table,” said John Abrams, a coalition steering committee member who has led the charge this year.



Edgartown moderator and poet laureate Steve Ewing led the meeting.
— *Larry Glick*

“If we do not support it we will have nothing. Think about this: all six select boards agreed to put this in front of the voters. We are hoping you will not just support it, but overwhelmingly support it,” Mr. Abrams said.

And voters did, over the objections of a handful who spoke against the initiative. The standing vote was 324-27.

Edgartown followed suit soon after the West Tisbury vote, approving the housing bank question in a voice vote on the town meeting floor at the Old Whaling Church.

Remarks were equally passionate from townspeople.

“I do know people who have lived in the state forest and you probably do too, although you might not know it,” said Kate Putnam, who is also a member of the coalition.

“Let’s not miss this opportunity to be part of the discussion. I’m afraid that if we don’t act, there won’t be anyone who can help me age in place,” she said.

Ben Hall Jr. echoed the theme.

“I am heartily behind this legislative proposal,” he said. “I cannot tell you how many of my friends, people I grew up with in Edgartown are not here anymore. The heart of our community is now leaving the Island . . . Let’s not have perfect get in the way of good.”

Oak Bluffs took up the article later in its meeting at the Performing Arts Center and the outcome was the same: a nearly unanimous vote in favor of the housing bank.

“It’s a step forward, not an adoption vote . . . we’ll send a powerful message to the legislature,” said Kira Sullivan, drawing applause.

Gretchen Coleman Thomas urged voters to get behind it.

“I will be 79 years old in December and I don’t have housing,” she said. “I’ve been looking off Island and it’s as hard as it is here,” she added.

Luanne Johnson agreed.

“I have a P.O. box in West Tisbury because I’ve moved around the Island like a lot of people have,” she said.



Late in the evening Tisbury made it unanimous, voting 205-23 to back the bank.

Kira Sullivan stirred applause in Oak Bluffs with remarks urging a vote for the housing bank. — *Mark Alan Lovewell*

“Let’s not miss this opportunity,” said coalition member Julie Fay. “This housing crisis threatens our community, our economy and our way of life.”

There were critics. “This legislation will do absolutely nothing for the fundamental problem of housing equity,” said Tony Peak. “Passing it codifies a two-tiered housing system,” he added.

But by far the majority came down in favor of the housing bank, calling it an important first step.

“We have a chance to make a difference and we have to start somewhere,” said Judy Federowicz.

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All four towns saw strong turnouts, as expected this year, with the housing bank question topping the docket.



Oak Bluffs voters in the Performing Arts Center. — *Mark Alan Lovewell*

It also was an evening to celebrate a return to some sense of normalcy in the annual town meeting schedule. Many voters marveled at being able to gather again, some maskless while others wore face coverings.

“It’s amazing to see everyone in person,” Edgartown IT director Adam Darack said during his report to the town.

In West Tisbury moderator Dan Waters gavelled the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m., with every seat in the school gym filled. In Edgartown at 7 p.m. it was a similar scene, with a long line of voters stretching outside the Old Whaling Church. Late-day light filtered through tall windows, casting shadows across the pews.

“Is this just an Island thing where no one ever starts on time?” one voter asked another who was seated next to her.

Outgoing West Tisbury poet laureate Spencer Thurlow read his last town meeting poem, and voters easily approved an annual town operating budget, trimming the legal spending line item from \$30,000 to \$20,000.

Early in the meeting a bylaw to regulate the size of residential homes saw overwhelming support, passing 352-11.

Many spoke in favor of the so-called big house bylaw, modeled after one already on the books in Chilmark.

“This bylaw provides the necessary guardrails for now and in the future and it’s the right time for it,” said Brendan O’Neill.

“Don’t we come here to be mostly outside as much as possible?” said Whit Griswold, drawing cheers.

Builder Gary Maynard added his view. “Many people here may be surprised to hear that I’m in favor of this . . . I build medium to big houses,” he said. “My wife and I live in a 1,000-square-foot house and we often find it too big”

In Edgartown, voters approved a \$40.9 million operating budget and 2.5 per cent cost of living raise for town employees after lengthy debate about whether the amount should be higher. An amendment to raise the amount failed. But voters were happy to open their wallets to bring back the Fourth of July fireworks, increasing a \$50,000 appropriation to \$75,000.



Tisbury voters had their say on the housing bank late in the evening. —
Tim Johnson

Oak Bluffs easily approved a \$35.5 million operating budget with no discussion. Voters agreed to appropriate up to \$6.9 million to shore up the East Chop bluff, which is critically threatened by erosion. The town has secured more than \$10 million in FEMA funding, but needs to show that the town is willing to pay its share in order to receive the grant.

“It is not our intention to pay the full \$6.9 million,” said town administrator Deb Potter, who said the amount is expected to be offset by other grants.

Voters also gave strong support to a proposal to appropriate up to \$26 million to expand the town wastewater treatment facility, which is nearing capacity, and extend sewer where needed. Select board member Gail Barmakian said the town intends to seek outside funding but needs to show town support for the effort.

“There’s a variety of funding out there. We want to get in line for this,” she said.

Richard Leonard also urged voters to approve the plan.

“The sooner we get moving with this and start the process . . . the better,” he said to loud applause.

In Tisbury voters approved a \$150,000 capital appropriation for repairs to the library. Town administrator Jay Grande said the town will be coming back with a much larger capital request for renovation and an addition. “It’s been plagued with issues from the day it opened

and some of these are related to the procurement processes that were undertaken years and years ago,” he said. “There’s been a lot of money spent on the building, but it’s been an incremental approach, not comprehensive.”

Zach Harris, Bill Eville, Aidan Pollard and Louisa Hufstader contributed reporting.

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