



Islanders will head to Boston on March 23 to advocate for a housing bank. *Ray Ewing*

Vineyard Coalition Heads to Boston in Housing Bank Push

Brooke Kushwaha *Wednesday, March 15, 2023 - 2:05pm*

When legislators convene on Beacon Hill Thursday, March 23, they will be joined by many Vineyarders hoping to ease the Island's housing crisis.

More than 200 Islanders are expected to take part in Martha Goes to Beacon Hill, an event organized by the Coalition to Create the Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank. On the steps of the state capitol, the group will lend its support to a proposed Vineyard housing bank bill that is before the legislature.

“We have healthcare workers, first responders, farmers, boat builders, retirees, retail workers, small business owners all willing to contribute,” coalition administrator Noah Lipnick said. “We had a dancer sign up who said she is very good at whistling loudly in crowds.”

All six Island towns voted in favor of the housing bank last spring, to be funded by a two per cent transfer fee on most real estate transactions over \$1 million. The housing bank aims to ease the burdens on renters and homeowners by converting existing properties into income-restricted rentals and providing prospective homeowners with loans for down payments, among other things.

But the road to approval has already proved to be a difficult one. Last year the initiative stalled at the state level and legislators traveled to the Island to discuss decoupling the transfer fee from the bill, saying that the legislature was more likely to approve statewide enabling legislation rather than a specific bill for the Island.

A similar bill for Nantucket was set forth by Mr. Fernandes, but died in the legislature.

Island towns, however, voted not to modify the document and in January Mr. Cyr and Mr. Fernandes filed a home rule petition on behalf of the Vineyard

Mr. Lipnick hopes next week's demonstration will set this bill on a different path.

“We wanted to make sure we hit the ground running, so there's no mistake in our legislators' minds that this issue is important to us,” he said.

The all-day event begins with a 7 a.m. ferry to Woods Hole, after which five private chartered buses will take attendees to the capitol steps. There, half the group are signed up to meet with legislators while the other half will make their presence known in front of the state house.



Islanders from every walk of life have signed up to attend the demonstration, said coalition administrator Noah Lipnick, pictured here. — Ray Ewing

Afterwards, participants will head back in the buses to catch the 3:45 p.m. return ferry.

Moving several hundred Vineyards on and off the Island is no easy feat, coalition member Abbie Zell said. It took several months of planning just to imagine what the transportation, food and itinerary for the event could look like. To encourage attendance, the coalition reached out to towns and business owners to give their employees paid time off to attend the event. Goldie's Rotisserie is also signed up to provide food for the day.

“Diverse representation and big numbers are critical to our success, so we wanted to remove whatever barriers possible,” Ms. Zell said.

To get critical face time with key legislators, John Abrams said coalition members have been in contact with Mr. Cyr and Mr. Fernandes, who are in the process of coordinating meetings for next Thursday. The group has also spoken with members of Gov. Maura Healey's office,

who have highlighted affordable housing as a top priority for the administration.

“She’s very supportive,” Mr. Abrams said. “This is the first time a governor has appointed a cabinet member specifically for housing. I’m not sure if they’ll be there on Thursday, but they’re certainly with us.”

Although Ms. Zell and Mr. Abrams have been involved in the housing bank coalition for several years, Mr. Lipnick first joined the coalition last December coming off campaign work with the Maine Democrats. With more than 70 per cent of Islanders voting in support of the housing bank, Mr. Lipnick said he had never organized around such a popular issue before.

“It’s kind of unheard of,” he said of the approval rate. “It’s made our lives a lot easier as organizers...Now it’s just been about letting the community know this is happening.”

Growing up spending summers on the Island, Mr. Lipnick said he began to feel the housing crisis acutely as he watched more and more of his friends move off Island to purchase houses and start their families.

“I think we all know too many people who may have grown up here, who want to live here, and have been forced to leave,” he said. “That’s the thing about this crisis. It affects everyone.”

Mr. Lipnick said he felt especially encouraged by the wide range of people who have signed up to attend next week’s demonstration, among them 50 high school students from Martha’s Vineyard Regional High School and the public charter school.

“We have an attendee as young as five years old and an 85-year-old,” he said. “It’s an intergenerational issue.”

Later this spring, the coalition is planning a letter-writing campaign to members of the housing and revenue committees and will make another trip to the State House when the hearings begin and Islanders have the chance to give testimony.

The most important thing, Mr. Lipnick said, is to keep the momentum going.

“When we invest in housing, we’re investing in our healthcare system, our public safety system, our education, and our small businesses,” he said. “I can’t think of an issue that doesn’t relate back to housing.”

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