



Nearly 200 Vineyarders gathered at the State House Thursday to encourage legislators to pass the Island's housing bank bill.

Ray Ewing

Islanders Plead Housing Bank Case at State House

Brooke Kushwaha *Thursday, March 23, 2023 - 5:00pm*

The 7 a.m. ferry was especially animated Thursday morning as nearly 200 Vineyarders took the first step of their day-long journey to the State House in Boston.

The crowd, all volunteer advocates mobilized by the Coalition to Create the Martha's Vineyard Housing Bank, had one mission: to encourage legislators to pass the Island housing bank bill. The event, dubbed Martha Goes to Beacon Hill, called upon Islanders to share their firsthand experiences of the housing crisis with key legislators, followed by a rally on the State House steps.

Seen as a key measure to alleviate the Island's housing crisis, the housing bank bill would allow the Island to fund housing initiatives using a two per cent transfer fee on most real estate transactions over \$1 million.

Last spring, all six Island towns voted in favor of the legislation, which traveled to the State House this January.

The day of action began in the gray hours of the morning as coalition members passed out breakfast pastries and T-shirts to volunteers ranging from high school students to retirees. Rev. Janet Newton, pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Vineyard Haven, sat in a ferry booth with her seven-year-old daughter, Orion.

“We see this as a learning opportunity,” Reverend Newton said. Orion sat across from her, drawing with markers and tending to her two Pikachu plushies.

“Housing affects her more than she knows,” Reverend Newton continued. “She’s had friends move away due to housing, and that’s helped her understand the issue on some level.”

For Reverend Newton, housing insecurity is an intergenerational issue. She said her father had recently moved to the Island after they had built a year-round accessory dwelling for him to stay in, but his difficulty finding health care on the Island means he can’t stay much longer.

“We’re going to have to find a permanent place for him to live, because we realized it’s not sustainable for him to stay here,” she said.



Tom Ellis and Liz Volchok are two Islanders who have had to leave due to housing insecurity but returned to share their story with state legislators. Ms. Volchok is the former program manager of Island Housing Trust, a nonprofit community development organization responsible for affordable housing projects such as Meshacket Commons and Southern Tier. Under her previous salary, Ms. Volchok said she made too much to qualify for affordable housing, but consistently struggled to make rent even while sharing costs with Mr. Ellis.

“It’s almost impossible to make little enough for affordable housing,” Mr. Ellis said. “The cost of living is so high so wages are high, but then everyone makes too much to get affordable housing.”

Seeking a more sustainable lifestyle, the pair moved to San Francisco last fall.

“The cost of living is lower, housing is cheaper and salaries are higher,” Mr. Ellis said.

These are the stories Vineyarders shared across Beacon Hill Thursday as the group split into advocacy teams and knocked on legislators’ doors before the noon rally. High school students from the regional high school and the charter school traveled with Jonah Maidoff and John Merrow to share how their education has been affected by the lack of housing.

“I’ve seen a little over 57 per cent of my friends leave the Island because of housing,” said Graysen Kirk, a senior at the charter school.



Islanders meet with legislators in the senate chamber Thursday. — *Ray Ewing*

Mr. Merrow shared the story of a 10-year-old girl he met in Vineyard Haven who told him she lived in a camper van in the summer while both her parents worked.

“That was eight years ago,” he said. “Something has to change.”

As volunteers gathered on the State House steps, Mr. Cyr recalled the last time a Vineyard housing group had staged a similar demonstration.

“The Vineyard came here to advocate for a housing bank back in 2005,” he said. “Imagine how different life would be if that had been successful.”

This time around, the legislation faces similar obstacles. Just last year, a housing bank bill for Nantucket filed by state representative Dylan Fernandes died in the legislature.

Although advocates are optimistic that Gov. Maura Healey’s pro-housing administration will help propel this bill forward, some lobbying groups such as the Massachusetts Association of Realtors have historically opposed transfer fee legislation. Mr. Fernandes said he was hopeful that the statewide transfer fee would resonate with communities across Massachusetts dealing with their own housing crunches.

“The median housing price in Massachusetts is \$600,000,” he said. “Even places like New Bedford are becoming unaffordable for working- and middle-class people.”

While committed to pushing through the legislation, both Mr. Cyr and Mr. Fernandes emphasized that the majority of the fight for housing security must be fought on home turf.

“The truth is most housing decisions are made at the local level,” Mr. Fernandes said. “This group should be showing up at the local level and pushing for local solutions — and looking to Nantucket for what they’ve done on creative housing solutions.”

Last May, Nantucket approved \$40 million in spending for housing initiatives. This year, Nantucket voters will be asked to approve a \$6.5 million permanent tax override to support the town’s affordable housing trust.

Mr. Cyr added that initiatives like zoning reform would go a long way to enable affordable housing development, as well as updated wastewater infrastructure to support higher density residential areas. None of the six Island towns, for example, have opted to join the

Cape Cod and Islands Water Protection Fund, he said, losing out on access to funding for critical wastewater upgrades.

“Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard are very good contrasts,” Mr. Cyr said. “Nantucket has done almost everything they can to address the housing crisis...the towns [on the Vineyard] have not taken advantage of these other opportunities.”

Still, coalition members were encouraged by the energy of Thursday’s event as Vineyarders from all walks of life demonstrated their support. When coalition co-chair Arielle Faria spoke to the crowd, she addressed high school students, retirees, year-rounders, seasonal residents, healthcare workers and more.

“I’m thrilled to see such a diverse group of people here today advocating for all of us,” she said. “Thank you for being here.”

More pictures (<https://vineyardgazette.com/photography/islanders-carry-housing-message-beacon-hill>).



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