

This Discussion Paper is a work-in-progress based on previous plans, on results of forums and surveys, and on the ongoing efforts of the Social Environment Work Group. . Please see the last page for how you can join this conversation.

How can we maintain a healthy, engaged, diverse community?

Martha's Vineyard is different. While its exceptional natural environment is immediately obvious, even a short-term visitor quickly discovers that the life on the Vineyard – the way people interact with each other and with their surroundings – is not entirely the same as on the mainland. This “social environment” of Martha's Vineyard is rich and distinct, especially for a community whose year-round population is only about 16,000, swelling to a summer peak roughly five-fold in size. In addition to the strong, centuries-long Island-family lineages that continue to exist among many year round residents, many summer residents and even short-term seasonal visitors also have strong, multi-generational ties to the Vineyard.

The combination of native and immigrant cultures, the forced intimacy of island seclusion, the challenges of island life, and the insistence of Islanders, maintain Martha's Vineyard as a place unlike everywhere else. As a result, the Vineyard is not only a beautiful setting to live, work and recreate, but also is a community that is diverse, complex, tolerant, supportive and resilient.

Compilation of Cultures: The Vineyard community has been enriched by a succession of different groups. The native people of the Island, the federally recognized Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), date back 10,000 years and continue to be a presence on the Island. From the 17th Century, English settlers and their descendents became a dominant population. In the 18th Century, the Island saw the origins of the Vineyard's Portuguese population. In the 19th Century, the Island became a retreat destination for mainlanders seeking religious respite, beginning the dynamics between year round residents and visitors that still help define the Island's character. The Vineyard, and largely Oak Bluffs, became a popular vacation destination for African-Americans. The Island's population grew relatively slowly until the 1970s, but since then, has multiplied more than 2½ times, seven times faster than Massachusetts as a whole, as a diverse influx of



people was attracted to the Vineyard: people attracted by the beauty, beach, and boating who built summer homes; people who moved here for jobs and chose to stay; retirees and others seeking an alternative lifestyle to mainstream America. In recent years, there has been an influx of people from all parts of the globe, especially Brazil, that have become a substantial new component of the Vineyard community.

Changing Population: The huge increase in numbers of people living on and visiting the Vineyard over the past few decades has had profound impacts upon the community – some positive and some negative. The desirability for people of means to vacation on and retire to the Island has greatly increased property values, pushing up the cost of living higher than the mainland. The increase in housing costs hit particularly hard people newly entering the Vineyard real estate market – young adults and new residents. The Vineyard has fewer people between the ages of 15 and 35 as the

Massachusetts average (21.2% compared to 27.5%) and the proportion of children is declining faster than elsewhere in the state. These factors combine to push the Vineyard's median age four years beyond that of the Commonwealth's (40 compared to 36 in 2000). Combined with the post WWII “baby-boom” cohort that is moving through all communities, by 2020, the year-round population between the ages of 60 and 70 will triple. A significant increase of seasonal residents moving here to retire would further increase that number. This aging population will affect both the demand for health and human services and the community's knowledge and creative talent base.

This discussion paper first suggests what might be considered defining elements of our Community Character and the principal threats to it. Then, it looks at the main challenges and promising initiatives for three broad components of the Vineyard's social environment – Health & Human Services, Education and Arts & Culture.

1. COMMUNITY CHARACTER

It is hard to specify exactly what factors define the Vineyard's distinct community character – its “small c” culture – but several features are often mentioned as being important aspects of Vineyard lifestyles and our social interaction.

- The Vineyard is rural, small-town America, with the strong community connections usually associated with such communities, high “social capital”, to use the jargon. People take care of each other.
- There is a sense of attachment to the Island. Given the various challenges of living on Martha's Vineyard, people have to make a conscious decision to reside here. The presence of six towns provides an even more local sense of community and opportunity for civic engagement focusing on local issues.
- There is a high level of community and public involvement, with a rich tapestry of community organizations, volunteer boards, committees, and non-profits. There is a sense of empowerment; that we are an island unto ourselves, freer to approach community problems differently or more innovatively.
- There is a strong attachment to the land and sea, to our farming, fishing and hunting heritage, and to appreciating and being in contact with our natural environment.
- The community is defined by the seasonal variation in population, and the relation between year-round and seasonal residents, who tend to have different socio-economic characteristics. The philanthropy of the seasonal residents provides important support to town services and community organizations.
- Some see the Vineyard as a safe harbor, a refuge from the mainland's commercialism, crime, and values. It is felt to be a place with a slower, gentler pace where one can get-away-from-it-all, even during the summer peak.
- Behind the rural façade is a community of great sophistication. Many highly educated year-round residents choose to live here despite limited professional opportunities; “washashore” retirees bring considerable expertise, experience and contacts; and the seasonal population links the Vineyard to cosmopolitan centers around the world.

Nevertheless, the Vineyard community faces particular challenges, mostly related to the fact that it is a small, rural island, or to the high cost of housing and living here.

- The most commonly raised concern is the perceived increased polarization by income and threatened loss of the Island's middle class. There is fear that we will become like some resort communities that have wealthy seasonal visitors served by a largely commuting underclass.

- A related concern is the decrease in the number of families with children. How many people are now moving here to raise families?
- The influx of new residents is often seen as changing the traditional character of the Vineyard. It has been suggested that some people move here saying they love it just as it is, and then try to re-create a homestead and lifestyle that mimics their off-Island primary or former home, with McMansions, five-car garages, heated pools, and suburban, manicured lawns.
- There are somewhat strained relations, misconceptions and even discrimination between ethnic groups.

Objective 1: Maintain the Vineyard's strong sense of community and inclusiveness, preserve the economic continuum, and increase understanding among groups (year-round/seasonal, income, age, ethnicity, color).

- **Improve coordination among institutions and town boards to deal with social environment issues:** Though there are some mechanisms to foster Island-wide collaboration within specific fields – such as the Health Council and meetings of all town health agents and police chiefs – we need greater coordination of efforts across disciplines. We need to define a mechanism to promote Island-wide cross-discipline collaboration to deal with all aspects of the social environment. At a basic level, the Martha's Vineyard Commission, Superintendent of Public Schools, Community Services, towns, and other entities should coordinate their efforts in gathering population and economic data to monitor trends and make more informed projections about the community's future.
- **Reach out to the Brazilian community:** As first-generation immigrants with a different native tongue, the large Brazilian community (perhaps 20% of the Island's year-round population) is less assimilated into mainstream Vineyard society and less inclined to participate in community/public service. Apparently, this includes a considerable number of undocumented residents in the U.S., meaning they may be more susceptible to exploitation while also less inclined to seek medical or legal help.
- **Provide information to new residents and visitors about Vineyard services and practices:** Prepare a welcome guide for new residents and visitors about various services and aspects of Island living and include information about what is special about the Vineyard environment, way of life, and culture and ways they can help retain the special qualities of our community. It could be distributed through real estate agents, towns, the Chamber of Commerce or the Steamship Authority.

2. HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

The health of our community is determined not only by access to affordable, high-quality health care and social services, but more importantly, by overall wellness. This depends on individual lifestyle and behavior; on interpersonal relationships within families, neighborhoods, and the community at large; on economic forces within a community; and on the quality of the community's environment. Health care providers are increasingly encouraging communities to focus on promoting wellness to prevent or minimize the need for traditional health care services.

The Vineyard is well served with a range of health and human service facilities and entities that provide high quality services.

- The full-service, critical-access Martha's Vineyard Hospital is undergoing a 90,000 square foot expansion to a 22-bed facility and, became formally affiliated with Massachusetts General Hospital in 2007.
- The Martha's Vineyard Community Services and the Vineyard Nursing Association each provide a range of specialized health and human services, much of it home-based.
- The Dukes County Health Council is a coalition looking at health issues. Its efforts helped create the Vineyard Health Care Access Program, helping residents obtain affordable, high-quality care, mainly assisting those with no health insurance, families with children, seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income residents.
- There are multiple town agencies and non-profits focused solely on the needs and care of senior citizens.
- The Vineyard has a network of physicians, nurses, and counselors, as well as an extensive array of alternative care providers.

Despite this rich array of service providers, the Vineyard institutions and community face particular challenges, many related to being a small, mostly rural island.

- Poverty, mental illness, and substance abuse incident rates exceed levels elsewhere in the Commonwealth.
- The low population density leads to heavy car use, and less walking. It also means that many people live in isolated situations, making it more difficult to socialize and to get help in an emergency. Isolation can contribute to depression and substance abuse.
- With an aging population, there will be a growing need for services. A 2006 retirement housing study showed half of the Vineyarders surveyed would prefer to age at home, yet with our dispersed development pattern, transportation is a huge issue for seniors and caregivers.
- There is a counter-culture sector that is "outside the system" by choice – people who don't immunize their children and who reject social services. There are also marginalized people – mentally ill and/or substance-

using people – who are not comfortable with the formal health care system.

- The isolation and limited population make it difficult to offer a full range of medical services, meaning that people have to go off-Island for some specialized treatments. It also makes it difficult to train staff, or let them upgrade skills. The high cost of housing and living makes it hard to attract and retain specialized personnel.
- Year-round services and not-for-profits are heavily supported by the generosity of seasonal residents. The dependability of such funding and our ability to sustain the current level of services is uncertain.

Objective 2: Make Martha's Vineyard a healthy community with a mindset to promote healthy lifestyles; to create a healthy and supportive environment in which people develop physically, mentally and socially; and to improve human and infrastructure capacity to provide necessary health and human services that are seamless, complementary, coordinated and accessible.

- **Provide more education to and support of family caregivers:** There will be an increasing need for home-based services for an aging population and more family members thrust into the role of caregivers. Family members need to have easy

access information, training and support services to improve the quality of home care, but also to reduce the stress often associated with family care giving. Vineyard Village at Home is one community response to this need.

- **Improve availability of daycare:** This is needed for children (especially infants) and elders, particularly for non-traditional work hours. This includes before- and after-school care and summer care for school children. The Vineyard Affordable Child Care Project is working on this.
- **Create a structure to address public health issues Island-wide:** The aim is to help town Boards of Health by focusing on specialized activities that individual town Boards may have difficulty dealing with, given their ongoing responsibilities, such as regulating septic systems and food service.
- **Create walkable neighborhoods and communities:** We don't always make it easy for people to have healthy habits: our pattern of development is most decidedly automobile dependent; sidewalks – where they exist – are frequently too narrow and obstructed with utility poles or mailboxes. We should provide and maintain adequate infrastructure for pedestrians. As we plan future growth, we should favor appropriately located higher density neighborhoods that promote physical activity and social interaction.



Hospital construction

3. EDUCATION

The Island's physical isolation from colleges, universities and the other resources of a metropolitan area on the mainland limit education on Martha's Vineyard – whether grade school, continuing adult education or professional development. For example, it is much more difficult for senior high school students to take advanced college courses, or for adults to pursue a degree, certificate or occasional night course.

The Vineyard's public schools have long addressed this by conducting field trips and excursions, to broaden students' perspectives and experiences. Dramatic technological advances in communications have expanded instructor and student access to worldwide information and hold the promise – not yet fully realized – for access to more educational opportunities and student-specific training. This also could satisfy the desire of residents and visitors for continuing education and personal enrichment.

The Martha's Vineyard six public schools and the MV Public Charter School provide pre-kindergarten to grade 12 education, generally recognized as being of excellent quality. For example, the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School has a 91% graduation rate, 6% higher than the state average, and a dropout rate of just 1%. The school population has been declining for about eight years; the 2008 total of 2,245 students was three-quarters of its facility capacity of 2,980. The public school system is the largest single Island employer, currently with about 600 employees.



Regional High School

Another important challenge in public education is that the high cost of housing and living on Martha's Vineyard is a significant challenge in recruiting and keeping teachers. Also, professional development for teachers is more difficult here than on mainland locations which have easier access to evening college courses.

The challenge of continuing development applies to other professions, as well. Many public employees and volunteers must regularly obtain training to remain certified. The addition of travel time to the required hours of instruction is a significant burden to people needing such instruction and a deterrent for some people to accept these necessary civic positions.

Objective 3: Turn the whole Vineyard into a school-without-walls by providing excellent quality, community-based K-12 education for students in the school system, and by

encouraging and enabling all residents and visitors to pursue education throughout their lives.

- **Provide greater vocational training geared to Island employment opportunities:** In response to this need, the High School, which already provides courses in culinary arts, hospitality, landscaping, and carpentry/construction, recently added courses in banking/financing and farming.
- **Provide more opportunities for community-based education for school students:** About 200 students participate in some work-study program each year, not including summer internships. However, Vineyard schools, and especially the High School, could expand opportunities to allow students to integrate their education with the rest of the community, both on and off Island, with techniques such as

internships, mentorships, on-line courses, and programs offering a year off between high school and university (e.g. City Year, other AmeriCorps programs). This will help Island students make the transition to jobs and/or university.

- **Provide professional development programs:** The aim is to make it easier for residents to take professional courses and work towards certification in various fields such as teaching, nursing and, perhaps, for emergency

response personnel. Past efforts to collaborate with off-Island colleges and universities have been mixed, since our small population base makes it difficult to support programs here. The Dukes Academy provides training courses for Island Realtors. A model for other professions might be the Martha's Vineyard Hospital's successful nurse certification training, combining on-Island courses with visiting professors, together with concentrated off-Island specialized training.

- **Provide post secondary education for residents and visitors:** Though past efforts, such as the Nathan Mayhew Seminars, have faltered, there is a sense that the community wants and could support a more robust program of continuing education. The new Adult & Community Education program at the High School offers a range of language and enrichment courses.

4. ARTS & CULTURE

The beauty, character, and quality of life have inspired the creative expression in many residents and visitors, and attracted many creative people to move to the Vineyard. The Island has a thriving arts and culture community, involving and supported by both the year-round and seasonal populations. For a small community, the Island has a remarkably broad range of cultural institutions, including a museum, playhouse, arts center, dance center, nightclubs, chamber music, native culture center, and several institutions focused on nature and farming. In addition, there are many libraries, historic buildings, museums, festivals, fairs, lecture series, and galleries. Venues for performing arts include the 791-seat Performing Arts Center at the High School, and about twenty smaller locales.

The arts and culture are important to the Vineyard economy, both directly in terms of the business they generate, and more substantially, indirectly in terms of their contribution to the Vineyard's role as a destination resort which is the foundation of the Vineyard's property values and economy. Some of the Vineyard cultural institutions and artists are significant on the national level.

Nevertheless, there is a sense that the Vineyard could be doing a much better job supporting the arts and of taking full advantage of the culture potential of the Island, both for personal fulfillment of residents and visitors, and for the economic benefit of the community.

Objective 4: Increase coordination of and support to the arts and culture community in order to bring various groups together, to foster cultural expression, to support the diverse for-profit and non-profit arts sector, to promote Vineyard culture to the local and visiting community, and to increase cultural tourism.

- **Create an Arts/Cultural Collaborative:** An entity could take the leadership in supporting, coordinating, and promoting arts and culture on the Vineyard. It could help coordinate event calendars (e.g. gallery openings, performances), take on promotion (e.g. weekly show on upcoming events on MVTV or Plum TV), and help solicit funding (e.g. grants, fundraising). The collaborative could also offer artists or groups assistance or training in the business

aspects of their creative pursuits, such as marketing, group purchasing, inventory, shipping, billing and taxes. This collaborative could create and maintain a database listing, which could be published as a directory.



The Vineyard Playhouse



Featherstone Center for the Arts

- **Create a Vineyard Arts/Cultural website:** A single website could provide information about or links to all cultural organizations, instructors, musicians, artists, nightclubs, activities, and events. This could be done by expanding an existing website (such as MVOL, Tickets MV, or Vineyard Voice) or by creating a new site.
- **Set up an Island-wide Arts Festival:** A festival held before the summer season – to make residents, visitors, and hospitality

workers aware of the broad diversity of Vineyard culture – might result in them informing their guests and clients throughout the summer. The festival could include an open house with demonstrations at all Vineyard cultural institutions and shuttle buses linking venues. It might be possible to hold this Memorial Day weekend (when there are already several arts events such as the

Family Planning Art Show at the Ag Hall and the Artisans Festival at the Grange).

- **Foster an increased offering of courses and workshops:** Courses and workshops on topics such as writing, painting, music, and cooking – especially in the off-season – would be of interest to residents, and learning vacations based on these activities could be promoted.
- **A broadened scope for the Martha's Vineyard Museum:** The Martha's

Vineyard Museum has announced its intention to broaden its scope to include not only the Vineyard's history, but also its arts and its natural environment (the latter on which our culture – and much artistic expression – is intrinsically based).

NEXT STEPS

You are invited to give your comments!

In the next few months, the Social Environment Work Group will revise this document based in part on public feedback, and it will be incorporated into the Island Plan.

Please send comments about this Discussion Paper by e-mail or on the website, and/or participate in the forum.



THE ISLAND PLAN

The Island Plan is charting a course to the kind of future that the Vineyard community wants and is outlining a series of actions to help us navigate that course. It breaks new ground while incorporating the best lessons of the present and the past.

The planning process began in 2006. Presently, there are seven other Work Groups: Built Environment, Energy & Waste, Housing, Livelihood & Commerce, Natural Environment, Transportation, and Water Resources.

A Steering Committee is coordinating the overall effort, and is outlining options with respect to Development and Growth.

A draft working version of the Plan should be ready late this spring and there will be a series of forums this summer to get feedback on the proposals.

PARTICIPATE IN THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT FORUM!

Thursday, August 30, at 7:00 pm
Tisbury Senior Center, 34 Pine Tree Road
Vineyard Haven

GET INVOLVED

The Island Plan is a community effort to confront the issues that will shape our future. Here are some of the ways you can join in.

- **WEBSITE:** The Island Plan website offers you many ways to give your input or to find more useful information including:
 - Discussion papers about the other topics,
 - A way to join the Network of Planning Advisors and Work Groups, or to get on the mailing list,
 - Background documents, results of forums and surveys, meeting minutes, etc.
 - The draft Plan will be posted on the website when it is ready.The same information is available in Island public libraries or directly from the MVC.
- **NETWORK OF PLANNING ADVISORS:** You can be part of this effort by joining more than 550 Vineyarders who are in the Network of Planning Advisors or have joined Work Groups on topics of interest to them.
- **FORUMS:** There will be a series of forums this summer to allow the community to provide input into a draft version of the Island Plan.

The Chair of the Social Environment Work Group is Linda Sibley. The Work Group currently has 111 members. The primary staff contact for the Social Environment Work Group is Bill Veno 508-693-3453 ext 15 or veno@mvcommission.org

The Island Plan is an initiative of, and is coordinated by, the Martha's Vineyard Commission.