

Martha's Vineyard Land Bank Commission
40 Meetinghouse Way
P.O. Box 2057
Edgartown, Massachusetts 02539

Dear Land Bank Commissioners:

We are writing on behalf of Martha's Vineyard's town housing committees to propose a more proactive partnership between the Island's housing community and the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank.

In 2022, the Land Bank wrote to the town housing committees encouraging us to identify properties that might be appropriate for "conservation-affordable housing collaborations." We welcomed that invitation and continue to support it.

We now ask the Land Bank to approach the relationship from the opposite direction as well.

When the Land Bank identifies, negotiates for, is offered, or is considering acquiring a significant property, we ask that it proactively evaluate whether an appropriate portion of that property could contribute to the Island's affordable and community housing needs — and, where the answer may be yes, bring the appropriate housing organizations into the conversation early enough to make collaboration possible.

The Land Bank has a long and important history of participating in affordable housing creation. Sepiessa Point, Morgan Woods, Takemmy Path, Eliakim's Way, Tiasquam Valley, Kuehn's Way, Smalley's Knoll and the Southern Woodlands transaction all demonstrate that conservation and housing do not always need to be competing uses. These collaborations have overwhelmingly originated with municipalities, housing organizations or other community entities approaching the Land Bank with an opportunity or need.

That model has accomplished a great deal. We believe it now needs to become reciprocal.

The Land Bank is one of the Island's most active and sophisticated purchasers of real estate. Over four decades, it has assembled thousands of acres and developed relationships with landowners, estates, prospective sellers and donors across Martha's Vineyard. As a result, the Land Bank often encounters significant properties and willing landowners before those opportunities are visible to a town housing committee or housing nonprofit. That vantage point is increasingly important. Housing committees should continue bringing conservation opportunities to the Land Bank. But the Land Bank should also bring housing opportunities to the housing community.

Why the Reverse Collaboration Matters Now

The need for this approach is evident in the scale of recent Land Bank acquisitions and gifts. In Oak Bluffs, for example, the Land Bank recently received a major 28-acre donation adjoining Wapatequa Woods. We are not suggesting that housing necessarily should have been built on that particular property. There may have been compelling conservation reasons not to do so. But the transaction illustrates the opportunity. A landowner willing to make such an extraordinary gift for the benefit of Martha's Vineyard might also welcome a conversation

about whether one or two appropriately located acres could provide several permanently affordable homes while the overwhelming majority of the land remained protected forever. The answer might be no. But another donor might find the possibility of creating a combined legacy of conservation and community housing particularly meaningful. The critical point is that the question needs to be asked while the transaction is still being shaped. The Land Bank regularly encounters large tracts, existing housing, willing sellers and philanthropic landowners at a scale that town housing committees generally do not. This creates a unique opportunity to identify housing potential before it disappears.

We are not asking the Land Bank to change its conservation mission. In fact, the Land Bank's existing Affordable Housing Policy already recognizes this responsibility. The policy provides that the Land Bank should perform a housing analysis on prospective acquisitions to determine whether housing could be located along the fringe of a property without materially compromising its conservation purpose. It also contemplates approaching sellers regarding affordable housing when such a possibility exists.

Our request is therefore straightforward:

Make that analysis a systematic and proactive part of the acquisition process.

For every significant prospective acquisition, we suggest asking:

- 1. Can the primary conservation objectives still be achieved while reserving a small portion for permanently affordable housing?**
- 2. Are there existing homes, cottages or other structures that could be retained, relocated or conveyed for community housing?**
- 3. Might the seller or donor be receptive to creating a combined conservation and housing legacy?**
- 4. Should the relevant town housing committee, Dukes County Regional Housing Authority, Island Housing Trust or another qualified housing organization be brought into the discussion before the acquisition structure is finalized?**

The answer will often be no. That is entirely appropriate. But on an Island where land has become extraordinarily scarce and expensive, failing to ask can permanently foreclose an opportunity that may never occur again. Once a 20-, 30- or 50-acre property has been acquired entirely for conservation, the opportunity to reserve one or two suitable acres for housing may effectively disappear forever. The time to evaluate the possibility is before the transaction closes.

This request should not be understood as an effort to turn conservation properties into subdivisions. It is not. Critical habitat, wetlands, important viewsheds and uninterrupted conservation corridors should remain protected. The strength of the model is precisely that a relatively small housing component can sometimes coexist with preservation of the overwhelming majority of a property. On a 30-acre property, for example, permanently protecting 27 or 28 acres while allowing two or three appropriately located acres to provide year-round affordable homes can be an extraordinary community outcome. The Island gains permanent conservation. The Island gains permanent housing. The landowner may achieve two important public purposes rather than one. And housing organizations gain access to land before subdivision and retail land values make affordability nearly impossible.

The Land Bank's own history demonstrates that this model works. The Land Bank's 2022 outreach effectively asked the housing committees:

When you see an opportunity for conservation and affordable housing to work together, call us.

We are asking for the same commitment in return:

When you see an opportunity for conservation and affordable housing to work together, call us.

To make that practicable, we respectfully ask the Commission to:

- **Reaffirm that housing potential will be evaluated during significant prospective acquisitions;**
- **Proactively discuss a potential housing component with sellers or donors where appropriate;**
- **consult the relevant housing organizations as early as confidentiality and negotiations permit;**
- **Consult with us on the preservation or relocation of existing residential structures before removal;**
- **Establish designated contacts between Land Bank staff and Island housing organizations; and**
- **Convene periodic discussions among the Land Bank, town housing committees, the Regional Housing Authority and Island Housing Trust regarding future cooperative opportunities.**

This is not a criticism of the Land Bank's past work. It is an invitation to build upon it. Few institutions have shaped Martha's Vineyard's future as profoundly as the Land Bank. Its success in protecting thousands of acres demonstrates what can be accomplished by thinking strategically about land over generations. The Island now faces an equally profound challenge in providing homes for the people who sustain our communities — teachers, healthcare workers, firefighters, municipal employees, farmers, fishermen, tradespeople, young families and longtime Island residents. The Land Bank does not need to become a housing agency to play an important role. It simply needs to make sure that when a rare opportunity exists to accomplish both conservation and housing, that possibility is explored before it is lost.

For decades, towns and housing organizations have approached the Land Bank seeking collaboration. We ask that the Land Bank now make that collaboration truly two-way.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Commission to discuss how such a framework could be implemented.

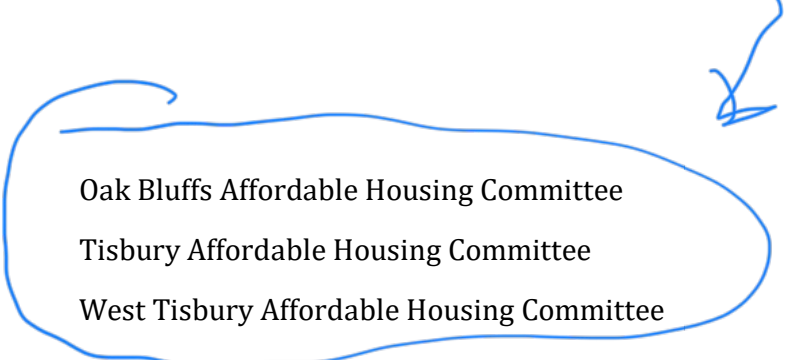
Respectfully,

Aquinnah Housing Committee

Chilmark Housing Committee

Edgartown Affordable Housing Committee

Proposed
Participation



Oak Bluffs Affordable Housing Committee

Tisbury Affordable Housing Committee

West Tisbury Affordable Housing Committee

cc:

Dukes County Regional Housing Authority

Island Housing Trust

Martha's Vineyard Commission