

July 5, 2023

TO: West Tisbury Select Board
FROM: Chuck Hodgkinson
SUBJECT: Howes House/Council on Aging

Dear Board,

This provides some serious concerns with the existence and activities of the Howes House/Council on Aging Project and requests this project be aborted and the committee dissolved. Here are the facts and issues as I see them.

1. I was asked to serve on this Building Committee before the Town Meeting vote on a \$500,000 article to hire an architect and OPM for a Howes House construction project. I asked where is this coming from and why is it needed. I was told the building is not accessible and is not up to building code. The committee wants to hire Keenan and Kenny as the architect. I disagreed with the project because there has been no discussion or agreement among voters about the purpose, space needed or cost of this project. From experience, I strongly advised against hiring this firm as it is not the right fit for this Historic Building and District.
2. At Town Meeting when the article seeking \$500,000 to hire an architect and OPM for this project was proposed I asked why do we need this, what will it cost, how the town would fund it and how much Chilmark and Aquinnah would contribute. The response was we don't know. There was no clarification that this will be a tear down so a Community Center could be built. The article language stating this project will "renovate/reconstruct the Howes House" and is misleading language. The average voter would understand reconstruct to mean renovate or restore. Reconstruct is a zoning legal term and nuance supported by case law defining it to mean a complete tear down. The article passed.
3. I spoke with two Fincom members after the town meeting and asked how they could have a split vote on minutia such as on the cost of a Building Permit and a \$10,000 legal line item for the Board of Assessors with a 45-minute town meeting discussion. Emails from Paris were even read at town meeting about this split vote. I then asked how could the Fincom have no discussion, a unanimous vote in favor of this \$500,000 when we do not know how much the Howes House building will cost to renovate, operate and staff, how the town will pay for it, its impact on taxes and how much the other two towns in the Up-Island Council will contribute.

The first said I guess we missed this one. I accept that honest mistake.

The second said we did not want to disagree with the Select Board. I do not accept this response as this independent, elected Board would then be redundant with the Select Board and not needed.

When I served on the Fincom the Park & Recreation committee came to us seeking support to build a community center so it could offer more programs. We asked what specific programs are town residents seeking and what will it cost to build, staff and operate. The answer then was the same as for this one—we don't know. They dropped the idea.

4. There was only one response to the RFP for an architect. After the town meeting article vote I sent correspondence to the Town Procurement Officer asking to re-issue the RFP and invite Heikki Soikkeli and Bruce MacNelly to submit proposals to renovate the building and bring it up to code. They both design houses and are very sensitive of the Town's Historic District and its architectural character. I was told no. The committee does not want to do this.

5. There has been much dissention about this project in Town. The Select Board recently stopped the project because "the Town was not ready for it". What has changed in a month that establishes the Town is now ready for it? A focus group of a dozen town and out of town residents does not determine whether or not to tear down the Howes House in the historic district and spend \$10 million for a community center.

6. The committee has divulged this will now cost \$10 million and be a complete tear down for a new community center. At \$1,000/sq. ft. \$10 million will build a 10,000 sq. ft. building. The Howes House is 3400 sq. ft. and the three floors of town hall have 6,000 sq. ft. of space. Is history repeating? The second town hall renovation attempt failed as it was thought to be a Taj Mahal.

Summary

The first of 12 guiding principles on how the Space Needs Committee would conduct business and make decisions and recommendations was: The mind is like a parachute. It only works when open. After many public forum discussions this committee mailed a written report of the 20-year plan outlining the future space needs for each town function, options, the pros, cons and cost of each option, timing and impact on taxes over 20 years to all town voters before the plan was unanimously adopted at town meeting. Each subsequent construction project had its own public planning and input forums before asking voters for any money.

This project is well intentioned but ill-conceived. Residents are throwing out alternative suggestions of what to do in an attempt to stop it.

I sadly heard of a committee comment that said the Historic District Commission (HDC) is "ruining their project" and the committee wants to hire a public relations firm to quell the public discourse. The Historic District and Commission are voter sanctioned with strong powers outlined in Mass. General Law for preserving historic districts. Thank goodness we have them. Our Historic District would look like North Tisbury does now if we did not have this district and Commission.

After many public forums and agreement to a clear direction we asked voters to approve a sum of money to hire an architect to restore town hall. We also advised voters to deny this article and money if they were not prepared to approve over \$5 million for the construction in a year. We then got permits from the Boards of Appeals and Health with abutter input for this project before going to voters asking for money to build it.

As I see it there seem to be four different Town issues that are jumbled together and need to be addressed publicly and separately as done with the space needs 20-year plan, its adoption and the subsequent construction projects.

1. What future services does the Council on Aging need to provide for West Tisbury, Chilmark and Aquinnah residents over 60 years of age as outlined in the Council on Aging Town Bylaw and why? Are these programs

consistent with the programs of the Commission on Aging established under Chapter 6 Section 73 of the Massachusetts General Laws as required in the bylaw.

2. Should West Tisbury continue hosting the Council on Aging for three towns and if so how and where?

3. Does West Tisbury need a Community Center and for what purpose? If so, what are the options, pros, cons and costs of each option for constructing it, how will it be funded and how much will be contributed by Chilmark and Aquinnah—as done with the Tri-Town Ambulance building in Chilmark? How much will it cost to staff and operate this large facility? These operating costs were outlined for the Library project before a dime was spent.

4. What do we do about the apparent facility improvements needed for the historic Howes House and how will this building be used?

Thank you for your consideration.