

## **The case for redevelopment as a central theme in the Island Plan**

Tom Chase 4 December 2006

Fragmentation of the landscape is the leading cause for the Vineyard's declining ecosystems and wildlife. It is also one of the leading causes that make much of the developed landscape, indeed the whole Island, less desirable to live in than it might be. Too many of our homes are far removed from the stores and other resources we need, creating unnecessary travel and congestion, consuming too much energy and time, obscuring too many vistas.

Where fragmented wild lands and fragmented developed lands interweave, the problems compound. Essential ecosystem services are disrupted. One ecosystem service, for example, is the ability of native vegetation to absorb excess nitrogen from rainfall (the source of 50% or more of the nitrogen that over-fertilizes our Great Ponds). In watersheds where large-lot development has invaded, not only is the native vegetation impacted, but septic systems, lawns, roads and driveways leach more pollutants into the ground water. And thus our shellfish, the livelihood of those who harvest them, and a traditional element of our Island way of life – all are threatened.

Theoretically, we can pay for some of these otherwise free services. We can, and do, buy bottled water Switzerland and Bay Scallops from China. Other services we cannot replace. Many of our native species, for example, require large parcels of habitat. For some of these, if Vineyarders don't protect them, they will in all probability be lost to the world. The good news is we have conserved a lot of land. The bad news is that most of it is in parcels too small to sustain viable populations.

The economic engine and zoning policies that currently drive the fragmentation of the Vineyard guarantees more fragmentation. It ensures further conflict over equally laudable purposes, such as affordable housing, conservation, municipal services and economically-driven development. It ensures compromises for all, and satisfaction for none.

An alternative is possible, the long-term redevelopment of portions of the Vineyard. Redevelopment, of course, is a common practice in urban areas, often as part of urban renewal. In this case, I conceive redevelopment in three different but necessarily complimentary ways. The first is to "undevelop" critical linkages between wild lands; to re-unite viably-sized parcels of habitat; and to restore ecosystem services where we need them. The second is to create new mixed-use villages - clustering attractively, conveniently and affordably priced homes with markets, small farms and infrastructure. In a sense, these new villages would represent the replacement of some of the houses removed in undevelopment zones. Finally, I see redevelopment as the revitalization and preservation of existing towns – making those areas increasingly more attractive and livable. This more like most urban redevelopment, which is often achieved by offering tax and other incentives to developers. I believe that the redevelopment of the Vineyard

will likewise rely on leveraging market forces, and will have to span a much longer period of time. The concept is daunting, but here are some reasons for optimism:

*We have enough land*, in terms of simple acreage, to provide sustainable habitat, ecosystem services, housing, and infrastructure and market-rate development – it just needs to be reconfigured. And with a third of the Vineyard’s land neither developed nor conserved, we have the space to transition that reconfiguration over time.

*Feasible techniques are already being created* on the Vineyard. In a model partnership between The Nature Conservancy and the Martha’s Vineyard Land Bank, the Conservancy will purchase homes in key areas as they come on the market. The Land Bank will purchase the property from the Conservancy over a 10 year period, at 0% interest. In the meantime, the Conservancy will lease the house to the Dukes County Housing Authority, free of charge, for use as affordable housing. At the end of the 10 years, the house will be removed, the land restored, and the Conservancy will recycle the money into other similar deals. And there are traditional techniques available to us: transfers of development rights, re-zoning, and tax incentives for sellers, buyers and developers.

*Funding is available*. The Land Bank/Conservancy partnership is founded on the Conservancy’s ability to obtain low interest loans and donations, because government funding is not available. But low-interest loans for communities and commercial redevelopment are often available. Moreover, redevelopment could be tremendously expedited through use of tax-exempt bonds, tax incentives for property owners, and market-based incentives for others.

*Time is on our side*. From a conservation perspective, the only good thing about developed land is that it’s already too late to save it. To become good habitat, the land will have to be restored, so it’s no longer urgent to protect it. This opens up new opportunities. For example, the community could buy remainder interests from willing sellers (i.e. transferred at the end of the owners’ or their heirs’ lifetimes). Future ownership is comparatively cheap, and can provide financial capacity for sellers to stay on-Island or to trade and relocate to villages.

*We have enough information* to plan some redevelopment goals now without future regrets, and leave room for our understanding and vision to advance and our practices to adapt. The Martha’s Vineyard Commission has already identified suitable places for increased zoning and development. The Nature Conservancy and Island conservation partners have identified how much land is needed to restore and maintain a viable sandplains ecosystem, and the priority areas to undevelop. (Viable habitat patches are about 5000 acres, we need three of them, and we’re about half way there). Existing smart-growth principles can guide the redevelopment of already developed areas.

*We have good examples to follow*. The Martha’s Vineyard Camp Meeting Association community next to downtown Oak Bluffs is one; Vineyard Co-housing, which has attractively clustered both affordable and market-rate homes, is another. Existing

developed areas could be redeveloped into more attractive villages, buffered with native plant landscaping and compatible agriculture, while the surrounding landscapes become less developed.

We can create the Vineyard we want rather than salvage the one we have. The path we're on now means the Vineyard will continue to get incrementally worse. Successful redevelopment will take longer than our lifetimes, but during them the Vineyard could be getting incrementally better. And it will both support and require the use of existing businesses and markets: brokers to sell real estate, trades people to remove, rebuild and remodel homes, and landscapers and farmers to bridge the gap between the village and the wild.