

# VINEYARD CONSERVATION

SPRING/SUMMER 2025



Inside: Jones Land Conservation • Limits for Leaf Blowers • Meetinghouse Way Subdivision • Plant Local MV • Beach BeFriends • Environmental Scholarship



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Spring has arrived. In this transitional moment, the new leaves etch the silhouettes of trees, revealing their individuality and clarifying the forest's layers, before it all becomes one lush haze of summer green. I welcome the sun on my face, the sound of tree frogs mapping hidden wetlands, and the saturated yellow of witch-hazel, forsythia, and daffodils – all marching through, each in their time, declaring the clearing of winter's stage.

How different from just a couple months ago, when I found myself contemplating the realities – and vulnerabilities – of Island life. I was riding to work with my stepfather, necessary because the day before, I had abandoned my own car in Woods Hole when what was supposed to be a quick weekend trip with my kids ended in that all-too-familiar way. The weekend gale had howled on into Tuesday, threatening to sentence us all to a second day of missed school, work, and the ability to sleep in our own beds. Coming home on foot on the first brave ferry was the most surefire way to escape.

As frustrating as it was to have my trip home interrupted, the inconvenience presented an opportunity to reflect. That ocean, sometimes tranquil and beautiful, sometimes angry and impassable, is literally the thing that defines the Island. It sets us apart and binds us together. Some of what makes life here inconvenient is also what makes it unique – there is a commitment to place that comes with having an ocean crossing between home and everything else.

To be defined by the ocean represents more than just the possibility of cancelled ferries. Our geography imposes on us very definite limits, and the imperative to harness our ability to plan within, and respect, those limits. I sometimes wonder if we recognize the tradeoffs involved in our choices as an Island, and their ability to shape significant change as they accumulate. Will we know what it feels like when (or ideally before) change goes too far? Too much traffic, too much expense, too much light at night, too few places to experience this special place as it was before we began redrawing things to match our individual desires.

Identifying the issues is easy. Growth and development. Biodiversity and open space. Housing and planning. Healthy ponds and clean drinking water. Community diversity and sustainability. But how do we hold all these things together in the limited acres between the hilly northern moraine and southern outwash plain? Can we be a land of opportunity and also a

community that understands limits? Do we agree on what we value enough to protect?

This riddle is what we work on every day at VCS. Our role in addressing these questions will always be to speak, thoughtfully yet forcefully, for the Island's natural environment. But to actually answer the questions – to make the decisions – is a community-wide endeavor. Some of this happens at the individual level, through the many small (and occasionally large) choices each of us make in our day-to-day lives that collectively make a meaningful impact on the future.

In addition, many important decisions are made every day by the dedicated citizens who make up the numerous boards of the six towns, the Martha's Vineyard Commission, and the County. If we are to be successful in charting a more sustainable course for the Island, it is essential that we have environmentally-minded people in those boardrooms. While VCS works to be in as many of these rooms as possible, we need members of the community to join us. Access to the political process, and with it the ability to affect decisions, is far more accessible than most realize. We understand the time constraints of modern life, and how daunting it can be to first engage with local government. A town board can seem intimidating to a newcomer – but these are just our neighbors! Many serving today had no more experience with government than anyone else when they first joined.

For this newsletter, we reached out to three community members who have recently stepped up into roles of public service (pp. 5-7). We hope their reflections serve as inspiration – and maybe a little nudge. One of the clear takeaways I've absorbed from my time at VCS is the importance of showing up, and speaking up, in local forums. It absolutely has real-world consequences.

If you are optimistic about the future and want to apply your talents and energy to making that vision a reality, this is your opportunity.

If you are frustrated with the system, worried about our current path, and feel like your voice does not matter, this is your antidote.

So, as we revel in the shrugging off of jackets, the growing of green things, and the return of a calmer ocean (until the start of hurricane season!), consider how you might plug into the choices directing the growing of this community. With or without us, change is occurring. And it is happening fast. Just take a look at the MV Commission's calendar for public hearings. We have been doing this work for 60 years and can't recall anything like the volume and scale of projects currently under review.

In moments like this, my first instinct is to pick up the phone and call Ginny Jones, who we lost this past winter. She was a dedicated advocate, a stalwart champion for the Island, and one of the fiercest defenders of the environment this community has ever known. She would have given me an earful about the urgency for action. It is in honor of her memory that we dedicated much of this newsletter to shining a light on the critical importance of public service and local government. The people who show up, the voices that lift up, are continually defining what we know as Martha's Vineyard. Join us.

*Samantha Look, Executive Director*

March Thaw

A red pickup  
hugs the white line  
between green fields.  
White wings beat  
across blue water.  
Again bloodroot,  
blackbird sing.

— Warren Woessner

*VCS Poet Laureate Warren Woessner is a former member of our Board of Directors. His most recent book is Exit-Sky.*

Welcome Aboard!

*Please welcome two strong additions to the VCS Board of Directors*

Juliet Mulinare was a life-long summer resident of Chilmark before moving to the Island full-time in 2013. Shortly after purchasing a home in



2014, she began a career in public service with the Town of Edgartown, where she worked for 10 years before her recent appointment as Dukes County Treasurer. She remains a member of numerous Edgartown committees, serving as Chair of the Edgartown Master Plan Committee and as the administrator for the town's dredge department, where she has spent many hours working to protect and maintain coastlines and waterways. She also has served since 2018 as Secretary on the Habitat for Humanity MV board, and was the transportation and infrastructure liaison for the Island's Climate Action Plan. Juliet is passionate about preserving the natural elements that make Martha's Vineyard so unique, as well as protecting the resources that sustain our thriving community.

Clark Myers has called Martha's Vineyard home for the past 43 years, where he enjoys hiking, kayaking, biking, and sailing.



He has worked in different facets of the construction industry, including as project manager for the MV Hebrew Center, Featherstone Center for the Arts, and many others, using green and sustainable building technologies. He also served as a manager for The Field Fund in their effort to promote and maintain natural grass playing fields at Vineyard schools, and helped in the campaign to keep plastic fields from being installed instead. It was the Island's natural beauty that drew Clark to live here, and he now welcomes the opportunity to serve on the VCS board and help protect it, and conserve our special home.

# Passing the Torch

Last fall, we lost one of our most stalwart conservationists, and a true pillar of the Island community. Virginia (“Ginny”) Jones was a committed supporter of VCS from the founding years, embodying our mission through her words and deeds for more than half a century. When Ginny finally joined the VCS Board of Directors in 2007, she brought more to the boardroom than most. She was an unparalleled source of knowledge and perspective on both the Vineyard’s history as well as the issues of the day. Her impassioned voice at board meetings inspired and emboldened our advocacy work.



Despite sometimes presenting a crusty exterior, Ginny was in many ways the public face of VCS. She was deeply generous with her time and not shy in her enthusiasm for the organization, spreading gift memberships far and wide, while asking anyone who might listen (friends, family, even dentists!) to support the conservation cause. An ever-enthusiastic volunteer, she could always be found stationed at the welcome table for all our events, greeting the guests with a warmish expression. She continued this tradition long beyond her years on the board (where she may well have stayed for life, if not for the term limits in our bylaws).

Everyone in the office came to know that a call from Ginny would be at minimum an hour-long commitment – but always worthwhile. Within the first five minutes of our many conversations, any initial hesitation to pick up the phone was dispelled. Ginny always had interesting and valuable information about the issues we were working on – as well as the ones which we should be – all shared with a smattering of the latest local chatter.

To know Ginny was to know her boundless generosity of spirit, as well as her clear intentions when it came to protecting the Island’s environment and preserving, in her words, a “way of life.” She argued passionately against the commodification of the land, and the Island in general. She was, frankly, aghast at the notion of the Vineyard as a luxury resort.

As much as Ginny could be brutally honest, she also was warm and kind. Her candidness and ease in talking about serious, even sometimes uncomfortable topics, was contagious and reassuring. She always had her thumb on the pulse of all the local conservation organizations, vocally supporting them – especially their hardworking staff.

That relationship continued until her very last days, when she remained sharp-of-mind and impassioned as ever. On our last phone call, she left explicit marching orders: “Save the Island!” Ginny’s fearless enthusiasm and unabashed honesty fueled much of the hardest-charging advocacy work done throughout this organization’s history – and now we must try our best to carry the torch forward.

## Conservation, Done Ginny's Way

“I worked with Ginny and her former husband Everett to put conservation and agricultural restrictions on the large property that they still owned together on Middle Road, abutting the Woods property. In fact, I did it all *twice*. After the property had been inspected, photographed, documented, surveyed, and mapped, the legal documents drafted, and some very positive chats with the town Conservation Commission ... Ginny changed her mind and decided that instead of dividing Everett’s share and hers with a north/south line, they should be divided east/west. And, instead of just a conservation restriction we should do that *plus* an agricultural restriction. So, I rewrote the documents, rehired the surveyor, redrew the maps, had a quiet conversation with the Con Comm chair ... and we did it Ginny’s way. Which, of course, turned out to be the best possible way – because it made doing something like Mermaid Farm possible.”

*Former VCS Board President Phil Henderson, recalling his work as a member of the conservation staff at The Nature Conservancy.*

## Saving a Family Farm & Conservation Keystone

An up-Island fixture straddling the Chilmark–West Tisbury town line on Middle Road, the iconic Mermaid Farm and Dairy is part of an over 60-acre property placed into conservation in the first years of this century. The working farm and state-licensed raw milk dairy is operated by Caitlan Jones and Allen Healy, who along with their sons Everett and Kent reside in the 18<sup>th</sup> century roadside structure near the well-loved farmstand (where all manner of dairy products, fresh vegetables, and sundries are sold year-round). The house itself was once located across the road at Brookside Farm, on the Tiasquam River, where it was originally a mill for carding or “fulling” (see box) wool.

Today, Mermaid Farm is a treasured community resource embodying the Island spirit of sustainability and self-reliance. But its path to permanent conservation was far from simple. It’s a story that illustrates how land protection work is often a long process, requiring teamwork and persistence, and the central importance of landowners’ determination to save something for the generations after them.

### *Inside Baseball: The Work of Land Protection*

Because the land was jointly owned by Caitlan’s parents, Virginia and Everett Jones, the first challenge to conserving the property (at the time still known by many as Orlin Davis’ farm) was to divide

the parcel into two sections of equal value. To accomplish this, a vertical, north/south division of the parcel was drawn, which gave Ginny and Everett each sole ownership of a lot of approximately 20-25 acres, while retaining joint ownership of the twelve acres fronting Middle Road (where Caitlin and Allen today run Mermaid Farm).

In 2002, Everett donated outright (“fee”) ownership of his parcel to The Nature Conservancy (TNC), realizing a needed tax benefit for the donation. Following that step, attention turned to a re-configuration of the property that would allow for the best conservation management in the future. Now holding fee ownership of Everett’s former lot, TNC began work with Ginny on a like-kind exchange of portions of their respective lots. The goal was to have Ginny acquire fee ownership of the southerly portion of both lots, adjacent to what would be Mermaid Farm, while TNC took ownership of the northerly portion of both lots, which was surrounded by existing conservation properties.

Ginny then began further work with TNC and VCS to protect the new reconfigured southerly parcel with a combination conservation and agricultural preservation restriction (“CR/APR”). That restriction was ultimately completed in 2004, following approvals from the Town of Chilmark and both the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental and Energy Affairs and Department of Food and Agriculture. All in all, it was about two years of work with surveyors, estate planners, lawyers, town boards, state agencies, and more – but the result was worth it.

### *A Win for Farming & Conservation*

When the dust finally settled, the two ridge-top lots were owned and managed by TNC, the two lots in the central portion of the property were permanently protected by a CR/APR overseen by VCS and TNC, and the agricultural heritage and future sustainability of Mermaid Farm was secured. Today, the property is not just a beloved working farm, but also a strategic puzzle piece linking one of the Island’s largest contiguous tracts of conservation land, directly abutting Waskosims Rock Reservation (purchased in 1990 by the Land Bank) to the north and west, the Frances Newhall Woods Preserve (protected by a CR recorded by TNC and VCS in 1991) to the east, and, across the road to the south, Brookside Farm, where another CR/APR (co-held by VCS and Sheriff’s Meadow Foundation) was recorded in 1998.

## What’s a Fulling Mill?

Even among those well acquainted with the Land Bank’s lovely Fulling Mill Brook Reservation, there are likely many unaware of the meaning of its namesake. In traditional woolen cloth production, “fulling” is the step where raw woven cloth is cleansed of its natural oils and other impurities. Fulling mills were common in New England in the early colonial period wherever water power was available – such as along the Tiasquam River by Brookside and Mermaid Farms. Driven by a waterwheel, huge wooden mallets would beat the cloth in a wooden tub for several days, eventually making a denser, smoother fabric that is more insulating and water repellent. (The wool was then stretched on great frames called “tenters,” held in place by iron “tenterhooks” – so now you also know what it actually means “to be on tenterhooks” – ouch!)

## Answering the Call

To honor Ginny’s legacy of public service, and with any luck inspire a new generation to answer the call, we reached out to three community members who have recently taken on new roles in local government: Casey Hayward (Tisbury Planning Board, Land Bank Advisory committee, Affordable Housing Committee), Jessica Miller (West Tisbury Select Board, Board of Health), and a recent addition to the VCS Board, Juliet Mulinare (Dukes County Treasurer, numerous Edgartown committees and positions). Let’s hear what they have to say!

### **What led you to seek your current position? Were you recruited?**

**Jess Miller:** My cousin roped me into the Board of Health. She showed up at my place of work, told me to go get my papers, get them signed and then get them back in by the next day...didn’t leave me much time to consider what I was getting into. And it’s all been downhill from there! A few years into BOH, I chose to run for Select Board because I felt I could bring a good sense of perspective and reasonability to the table.

**Casey Hayward:** I taught middle school science on the Island for eight years, covering the Island’s geology, the water cycle and



Left: Ginny and Brendan welcome the crowd to Mermaid Farm for a 2023 Winter Walk (Photo by Signe Benjamin)

Right: Mermaid’s previous farmstand, circa 2014 — today’s is *just* enough larger to get the job done. (Photo by Brendan O’Neill)

Opposite page photo courtesy Jones family



## Answering the Call, continued

freshwater conservation, the carbon cycle, ecosystems, biodiversity and habitat fragmentation, pollution – especially plastics – and, of course, climate change and resiliency. As a scientist and environmentalist, I couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between the enthusiasm and understanding that my students had and the general public's gap in scientific knowledge and engagement. There's an innocence that children have – untainted by the machinery of capitalism – that many adults seem to have lost. That pushed me into action and reminded me to listen to my inner child – the one who still believes in a world our children deserve.

### Was there any particular issue that you were concerned about before you took on this role?

**Juliet Mulinare:** I was aware of a few years of instability in the County Treasurer's office due to frequent turnover, and how this was perceived by the rest of the Island, so one of my biggest goals was to provide stability and continuity. The County has a ton of potential to facilitate more regional programs and services that would benefit everyone, and to maximize the value of tax dollars spent towards making those opportunities available.

**Casey:** It was the debate surrounding the plastic field. Freshwater resources are becoming more contaminated with PFAS, plastics, and agricultural runoff. The largest consumers of freshwater today aren't people but industrial agriculture, meat production, and now, the cooling of massive computer servers. On Martha's Vineyard, we rely on a single-source aquifer, making water protection even more critical. I don't understand why we would cover a large area of land – directly over our aquifer – with plastic turf that heats in the sun, breaking down and releasing known carcinogens and endocrine disruptors.

### In contrast, is there something you've come to believe is more important due to your experience now? Or maybe more complicated than you knew?

**Casey:** The housing crisis is far more complex and nuanced than I ever realized. Striking the right balance between development and conservation requires careful, strategic planning to determine what types of housing are needed and where they should be built. I serve on the Tisbury Affordable Housing Committee, a role that is both important and incredibly emotionally draining. I am one of just a couple millennials, and the only renter there, which often makes me the outlier in discussions. The priority is clear – we must create pathways for year-round residents to own homes, build equity, and establish generational wealth. But at the same time, I'm a fierce advocate for renters, who are often overlooked in housing conversations.

**Jess:** It's all more pressing and more complicated than I could have imagined. I really think we need to put the brakes on development, both to protect natural resources and to better understand how to proceed taking infrastructure and physical limitations into consideration. Economic growth and wealth, or the desire for it, have superseded providing for the basic needs of the people. Not being able to get doctors, vets, home services, housing, etc ... that's not a great way to live. We seem to be constantly in the position of

reaction, putting out whichever fire is burning the hottest, instead of planning with consideration and forethought.

### What do you see as the issue that is the biggest current challenge or concern for the Vineyard?

**Juliet:** I think the biggest challenge for the Island right now is balancing all the development that comes with a developing world, against maintaining and protecting the natural environment that makes everyone want to come here in the first place.

**Casey:** We have so many pressing concerns. Finding the right balance between development and conservation while ensuring housing for our year-round population is a major challenge. The reality is that we have surpassed the Island's carrying capacity – there is only so much our finite space and resources can handle. We need to invest in our year-round population and in real, sustainable jobs that support our infrastructure. It's no secret that we need more medical professionals, veterinarians, municipal workers, and the essential people who keep this island running.

### What would you say to someone who is interested in town government, but is worried they just don't have the time?

**Casey:** Start small and follow your heart. There are boards that require less time but still make a big impact – the Historical Commission, Open Space Committee, Waterways and Natural Resources, Conservation Committee, Climate Committee, Affordable Housing Committee ... so many boards. Think of it like joining a club in high school!

**Jess:** I often suggest people start on a board that requires a little less time, fewer meetings, etc. That's a good way to get a sense of if you enjoy serving. It's also a good idea to attend meetings before joining a board or committee to learn about the subject matter and the characters involved. In my opinion, serving should feel valuable, even if challenging at times. If it doesn't feel relevant, it's not worth the effort.

**Juliet:** I would say, what do you feel passionate about? Do you love the water? Then join a conservation commission, a ponds committee, or a harbor advisory board. Do you love open space and taking your kids to the local playground? Join the Parks Commission. Are you worried about water quality? Check out the Wastewater Commission or Shellfish Committee. Do you want to weigh in on property values? That's the Board of Assessors. All these options do come with time commitments, but it's usually only a few hours per month, and especially now with many meetings happening on zoom, there is even more flexibility to get involved.

### What would you say to someone who is interested in town government, but they just don't know how to make it happen?

**Casey:** Make your intentions known and don't hesitate to ask for help – we want to support you. Your voice matters, and having diverse perspectives in the room makes our democracy stronger and more representative. Most importantly, know that you are already qualified. Simply by living in this town, you have gained valuable insights and experiences, and your perspective is just as important as anyone else's.

**Jess:** Reach out to me, or someone you know who's currently involved. Check out the town websites to see meeting postings and find out which committees/boards have vacancies. You can also contact the town hall to find out how to get involved.

### What about campaigning – was it stressful? Were you ever worried about hurt feelings among friends, or your opponents?

**Jess:** The Select Board campaign was a little stressful. It's a small town and people have strong allegiances. I was friends with one of the other candidates and although I wanted to win, I did not want any hard feelings. In the end, I think he was glad I won, and now we joke that he's glad to not be in my shoes.

**Juliet:** Yes, it was stressful and there were a lot of feelings involved. Running for office can turn personal very quickly, which I wasn't exactly expecting when I initially decided to run. But it also was an incredible learning experience that generated a lot of self-reflection. It was an interesting experience but it's not for everyone, and I'm not sure I would do it again. It's important to remember that most town government jobs are appointed, so if running for office feels overwhelming, there are myriad other options to serve.

**Casey:** As a woman, I've often received the implicit message that I should avoid conflict, soften my tone (something I've never heard directed at a man), and that speaking my mind can be seen as “unladylike.” But I find it liberating to have a platform where I can express my thoughts and represent the people who elected me.

### Were you nervous on election day? If so, was it more being nervous that you would lose, or that you would win?

**Juliet:** Yes, though it was also one of the coolest days of my adult life, and the words of support I received for putting myself out there made everything worth it. I think I was mostly nervous thinking that it would be embarrassing to lose, but that was never an issue – even though I did lose.

**Casey:** It's exciting, it's true democracy in action.

### Based on your experience, do you think environmental protection is a priority concern in our community?

**Jess:** Not as much as it should be. I'm afraid that people's desires to have exactly what they want, green lawns, houses close to the water, giant houses, and nostalgia for preservation of historic relics too often overrides what would be best for the environment.

### Do you think there are ways we could better elevate environmental or open space protection?

**Casey:** To gain broader support for conservation efforts, we need to connect them to direct community benefits. For example, it would be more impactful for the Land Bank to purchase small lots in Tisbury to protect our critically endangered open space, or to create community gardens and parks. These kinds of investments make conservation meaningful to everyday people.

**Jess:** I feel that, all in all, the Island has done a pretty good job with open space protection, and I am glad that the Land Bank and Sheriff's Meadow continue to acquire undeveloped parcels. I would like to see a focus on limiting development anywhere near our shoreline and other water bodies. I would like to see adjust-

ments to zoning that would more strictly limit the size of homes and require or encourage cluster development and preservation of large parcels, instead of the continued development of giant (usually vacant) buildings on big parcels close to the water.

### “Conservation” encompasses a lot of different ideas and values. What does conservation mean to you? As far as you can tell, what does it mean to the people of your town?

**Jess:** In West Tisbury, from what I can tell, conservation means preserving our rural character – keeping farms alive, homes built to scale, land open and wooded and undeveloped. It means fending off the rapid creep of suburbanization. For me, conservation pertains not only to the natural elements of the Island, but also to my community, and our way of life here. I like knowing the people in the grocery store, the post office, the families at the playground, the people on the trails. That feeling, that identity, that special sense of knowing, comes with a sense of responsibility to the land and the people. I take that responsibility seriously.

### Do you ever feel like you don't have the necessary information to make a decision that's in front of your board or committee? Where do you look for information when that happens?

**Casey:** Yes. It takes a lot of research, reading and listening to make important decisions. I usually go to the neighbors first – they know the history of a piece of land or a house, they know its historical and ecological value, and they are invested in it.

**Jess:** Yes. I tend to rely heavily on the board administrators, often looking to them for information and their perspective. I look to citizens and professionals with expertise in the area, and also use the internet and state resources to do research.

### If it's not a question that needs technical information, but it's just a hard decision and people have good points on both sides, how do you decide?

**Casey:** The important thing to remember is that it is never just your decision, and our government was structured like that for a reason. We vote, we need a majority, we have consensus, and at the end of the day we shake hands and go home, win or lose, ready to start again tomorrow.

### What's the hardest vote or decision you've had to make on your board or committee? Why?

**Jess:** That's a tough one. Dangerous dog hearings are probably the worst. Of course, there was Covid, which was incredibly stressful, literally feeling like the community members' lives were in our hands. Otherwise, the biggest decisions we've made in my time on the Select Board have been starting the residential tax exemption and working up an event bylaw. They are both issues I truly believe can positively impact my community, but not without some potential damages. I find that, in reality, we can't have it all, we can't satisfy everyone's desires, so I just do what I can and hope for the best.

*Note: Many excellent responses had to be omitted due to space limitations. We offer our greatest appreciation to Casey, Jess, and Juliet for sharing their wisdom and insight with us, and for their passion for making this Island a better place for all.*

# A Voice for the Island

by Sarah Glazer

When I think about my love for the natural landscapes of the Vineyard, and how I first encountered the Island almost 40 years ago, I think of it as a pristine gem.

It's where my children swam and went crabbing for hours at a time in Chilmark Pond; it's the place where I first saw the Milky Way in a clear night sky. (As a child growing up in New York City, I always thought those constellations projected at the Hayden planetarium were some sort of scientific fantasy – not something you could actually see in the sky.) It's the place where I first tasted those tiny, unbelievably sweet, bay scallops – which can only survive in pristine water, and so are no longer plentiful in the polluted waters off Long Island.

But in recent years, it's become clear that I can no longer sit back and just enjoy the simple pleasures of the Vineyard – because they are changing before my eyes. My friends who harvest bay scallops reported that they found fewer than usual last year, raising questions about threats from disease and pollution. Even closer to home, blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) have appeared regularly over the past three summers in shallow Chilmark pond. It's poisonous. I can no longer take my toddler grandchildren there to swim in the same waters where I once brought my own children.

As more and more people come to the Vineyard, building houses and septic tanks that spew nitrogen into our waters, I worry that we're spoiling the very purity we came to enjoy. It reminds me of the Dr. Seuss book I've been reading to my grandchildren, *The Lorax*, where a business magnate chops down all the Truffula trees to manufacture garments called "thneeds" – choking the valley with pollution and driving away the animals. As Dr. Seuss writes: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

I know we all want things to get better. But I'm realistic enough to realize that our society is engaged in a giant experiment not that different from the one in *The Lorax*. We're hoping that the environmental damage we've done is reversible, but we don't know for sure. Would requiring everyone on the Vineyard to switch to nitrogen-reducing septic systems mitigate the pollution enough to restore our ponds to health? Might such a step also incur an unintended consequence



"New Growth" by Emily Gilley, First Place winner in the 2024 Art of Conservation

of encouraging even more house construction? Will convincing my neighbors on Chilmark Pond to stop using fertilizers on their lawns (as we did last year) help? Or is it too small a step to make a difference?

When I recently read the history of the Vineyard Conservation Society's accomplishments, I realized that many of the things I treasure and take for granted are the result of VCS advocacy – the beautiful, tree-shaded Lambert's Cove Road (one of my favorite bicycling routes), preserved by a Scenic Road designation in the 1970s; the walking trails of the magnificent Waskosims Rock Reservation, where VCS fended off numerous attempts at subdivision development until it could be purchased by the Land Bank.

In some ways, I wonder if those battles were easier to fight years ago, with clearer opponents in profit-seeking developers. These days I think our efforts will be more complex. When I look out over the ocean from my house in Chilmark, instead of a dark, starry sky I now see the red flashing beacons of wind turbines – a change that clearly has both positive and negative effects on our environment. We will need to balance the demands for more affordable housing with our concerns for biodiversity, open space, and clean water. And just as the lone figure of the Lorax spoke for the trees in Dr. Seuss' book, we'll have to speak up for the natural wonders of Martha's Vineyard.

## Island Under Pressure

*As the Vineyard faces an extraordinary wave of development, local decision making is essential*

In 1974, when the legislation was adopted to create a new planning and regulatory body for Martha's Vineyard – endorsed by Island voters, passed by the state legislature, and signed by the governor – it was in response to a crisis. The pace of development on the Island had exploded to the point that more than 700 houses, and dozens of new subdivisions, were being built every year. That rapidity of growth, but also the fact that it was happening with no coordinated planning, no assessment of whether a given project would benefit the common good, and no way to limit negative impacts, spawned deep concern within the community that the Island's unique character and natural resources were at risk of being destroyed.

The result was the formation of the Martha's Vineyard Commission, a unique new regional body with both planning responsibilities and significant regulatory authority. While the MVC's planning work is largely carried out by its professional staff, that regulatory power is most often expressed through reviews of "Developments of Regional Impact" (DRI), conducted by elected and appointed Commissioners. These local government representatives are entrusted to weigh a project's benefits and detriments along numerous criteria, before deciding if it needs modifications to reduce negative impacts (or mitigation of unavoidable ones), and, ultimately, whether to approve or deny it going forward at all.

Right now – beginning last fall, gathering steam this spring, and destined to continue through summer – the MVC is dealing with an unusually heavy slate of DRI reviews. The meeting calendar is overstuffed with hearings, both because of the high number of projects, but also due to the sheer scope of several very large proposed developments. Because of their greater impacts and the heightened interest from the community, these complex proposals often result in longer hearings, extending over multiple nights across many weeks, before the MVC can reach a decision.

Due to the scale and number of these developments, all occurring in today's climate of rapid growth, soaring real estate prices, and strained resources, this moment will be one of most consequential periods for the effective use of the Commission's DRI review power in their now 50-year history. Collectively, the DRIs under review now would, as proposed, add over 500 bedrooms to the Island's housing stock, along with the associated environmental impacts. To be fair, today's subdivision proposals are not as large or dense as the most outrageous plans of a half-decade ago (such as the construction of 700 houses on what is today Katama Farm, averted by the work of VCS and others). Also notable is that most big proposals today include some sort of effort to address the Vineyard's shortage of affordable housing – a worthy goal, but one which is often undermined by the market rate portion of the project (as the new luxury vacation homes will demand additional services, to be supplied largely by workers who cannot afford market rate housing). The three largest DRIs currently on the docket embody a wide range of approaches to the housing issue: 1) "Katama Meadows" (aka "Meeting-house Place") proposes adding 36 income-restricted apartments to the primary development of a suburban-style subdivision of large houses; 2) "Green Villa," taking advantage of the state's Chapter 40B statute allowing the avoidance of most town-level review for affordable housing developments, would create 100 income-restricted apartments and four retail businesses (or alternately, 136 apartments without the retail component) in Oak Bluffs; and 3) a second 40B proposal from the same developer, "Edgartown Gardens," would produce 60 condominium units, but with only 20% income restricted – the minimum amount allowed under the 40B statute.

In our advocacy role, VCS will continue to weigh in on the most important of these reviews through our written and/or oral testimony. For a sample, we've included at right an excerpt from our first letter regarding the new Katama Meadows proposal. An important aspect of this review (unaddressed in this letter) is that it takes place under the cloud of ongoing litigation, as the applicant has taken the unusual step of challenging the Commission's decision to deny their previous proposal, first in the county Superior Court, and, having lost there, now at the state Appeals Court. The proposition that developers with deep

pockets may circumvent ordinary review by the local community, opting instead for a legal debate in state court, would create a two-tiered process for different applicants based on their willingness and capacity to sue. More important, it represents a grave threat to the independence of the MVC and its ability to effectively pursue its mission to:

*"...protect the health, safety and general welfare of island residents and visitors by preserving and conserving for the enjoyment of present and future generations the unique natural, historical, ecological, scientific, and cultural values of Martha's Vineyard which contribute to public enjoyment, inspiration and scientific study, by protecting these values from development and uses which would impair them, and by promoting the enhancement of sound local economies."*

(VCS testimony to the MV Commission, March 20, 2025)

... We write today to express our deep concerns regarding DRI 773 ("Katama Meadows"), a proposal to develop 74 units of housing, comprising 286 bedrooms, on some of the last remaining intact habitat in this part of the Island.

VCS has testified in opposition to previous proposals for similarly conceived developments at this location, citing detrimental impacts including wastewater and pond pollution, habitat destruction and biodiversity loss, increased traffic and night lighting, carbon emissions and climate change, increased burden on community services, and loss of local character, among other issues. We were relieved by, and deeply grateful for, the Commission's decision in 2020 to deny the version (682B) that ultimately came to a vote.

In contrast, we are taken aback by this latest proposal, which represents a significant increase in density, and corresponding environmental impacts, over the one which was denied. The project reviewed under DRI 682B would have produced 42 units totaling 164 bedrooms, meaning this new proposal calls for 76% more units, and, probably more consequential for the environment, 74% more bedrooms. It can, and certainly will, be argued that this is mostly due to the inclusion of a cluster of 36 affordable housing units. In fact, the increase in density is due both to the new additions and the failure to compensate for them with a meaningful reduction in the market-rate luxury homes.

Over the past five years, during which time the scale of this proposal somehow expanded by three quarters, other important changes have occurred: more housing (both market rate and affordable) has been built, including a large development next to this site; internet-based short-term rentals have become a more significant (perhaps dominant) element of how the Vineyard's housing stock is used; public resources have become stretched ever further; traffic has increased and ferry reservations have become more difficult to secure; and perhaps most alarming, nitrogen pollution (mostly due to wastewater, but also lawns) has increased to the point where pond closures and cyanobacteria warnings are now regular occurrences.

As the current DRI review proceeds, and more testimony and data are received, we urge the Commission to carefully consider the environmental impacts, and consequences for the Island community, that would result from approval of this project, at this sensitive location. We ask that Commissioners consider that the inclusion of the affordable rental units is meant to offset the harm to housing affordability created by this very project – it is mitigation, not a gift to be exchanged for an otherwise harmful development. The focus of this review should be on the most impactful part: the construction of a dense cluster of 26 overlarge luxury houses that will primarily be used as investment properties. VCS is confident that once the environmental detriments are fully evaluated they will easily exceed any purported economic or social benefits of this development.





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Front cover: "Washed Ashore" by Madison Mello (Special Distinction, Photography)

Below: "The Art of Comparison" by Anina Garvin (VCS Staff Pick, Photography)

*Selections from the 2024 Art of Conservation: Resilience*

