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Buildout Deadlines: Town of Aquinnah Sets Good Example

By MANDY LOCKE

At the westernmost tip of the Island just four years ago, the residents of Aquinnah knew the potential for total buildout loomed just ahead in an era of unbridled development.

Over the last decade, the community of 200 year-round residents watched development stretch the seams of the town's 4,056 acres, and they knew that the intensity and nature of new house construction threatened to devastate the rural character of Aquinnah.

The second smallest town in the state suffered severe growing pains over the last decade. One hundred and fifty new citizens joined a community of 200. Fifty new year-round homes added to the stock of 82 - making the town the fastest growing community in the commonwealth. Aquinnah now claims 388 houses and 125 of them are occupied through the year.

"In the late 1990s, the development boom was at full speed," planning board member Peter Temple said, noting how old traditional camps were being replaced with what he called trophy homes.

The town stepped to the plate in 1999, adopting a blanket district of critical planning concern (DCPC) for the entire town of Aquinnah, an overlay district supplementing two other DCPCs covering Moshup Trail and the Gay Head Cliffs.

"It was a statement to the world that [our land] is a unique resource," said Megan Ottens-Sargent, Martha's Vineyard Commission member from Aquinnah. "It wasn't about saying no; it was about having some sort of integrity" in planning the future of the town.

A strict set of new zoning bylaws followed the next year - setting reviews for new homes and mandating archaeological site review by the town and the Massachusetts Historic Commission for any new development. Each home must navigate through a stringent set of zoning regulations - a set of bylaws that govern everything from house height and footprint in visible areas to acceptable building materials and brush-cutting procedures.

"We didn't want new houses creating a new skyline [in Aquinnah]," Mr. Temple said.

So when the state Executive Office of Environmental Affairs delivered a buildout analysis for each of the Island towns last month, Aquinnah was ahead of the curve in planning for future growth.

The state calculates the tiny rural township could absorb as many as 265 more homes on 1,178 acres of undeveloped land. One hundred and eighty-five of those new houses would serve a seasonal base of 452 people, while the remaining 79 potential homes could accommodate 194 permanent residents.

In the most simple of calculations - the complexities of topography and the future plans of large land owners aside - Aquinnah has 45 years before it reaches the buildout deadline as projected by the state. A building cap of six permits per year, adopted as part of the DCPC regulations in 2000, ensures the slower pace. And with an affordable housing stock of 30 per cent - boosted by the 18-unit tribal housing development in 1996 - the town is immune to dense 40B developments.

Aquinnah has the highest stock of affordable housing in the state and is the only Island community to surpass the 10 per cent threshold, under which a proposed 40B development could skirt local zoning.

But those who know Aquinnah question the state's buildout projections.

"I'd like to know where they would suggest putting them," conservation commission member and fire chief Walter Delaney said.

It assumes too much, the critics argue.

Large expanses of wetland - 640 acres to be exact - appear largely unbuildable at the moment. Zoning regulations that require a special permit for the clear-cutting of trees add obstacles to the development of available land in the town's 2,500 acres of forest. And nearly everyone in Aquinnah has heard the stories of drilling 320 feet into the earth only to find no water. The state assumes water is available for every two-acre parcel of undeveloped land.

The buildout projection of 265 houses assumes the 400-acre Kennedy compound - one-tenth of the town's land mass - will be subdivided. But both the family's renewed loyalty to the land as well as the archaeological and environmental sensitivity of the estate make development of this land less likely than the statistics reflect.

And then there's 467 acres of land owned by the Wampanoag Tribe. Only a fraction of that holding can be developed, said Woody Vanderhoop, tribal planner. Two hundred and thirty-nine acres account for the tribal common lands, including the cranberry bogs and land along Lobsterville Road. Another 31 acres encompass the cliffs, and nine acres cover the hatchery and herring run. Sacred and historic places like Indian burial grounds account for another 20 acres of tribal land.

And of the 196 acres of interior tribal land, roughly half sits in wetlands, Mr. Vanderhoop said. Of the 100 developable acres, 18 housing units and the tribe's multipurpose building occupy about 40 acres already.

The tribe is currently undergoing a land-use strategic planning effort.

"It's about striking the balance between full-scale development and keeping things untouched," Mr. Vanderhoop said.

But it's not just the lay of the land that presents a looming unknown for future development in Aquinnah. Market values, more than the availability of two-acre parcels, will drive the pace and nature of development in Aquinnah.

The Island's smallest town boasts of some of the highest real estate values on the Island. Median home prices over the last two years rose to just below a million dollars - hitting a high of \$900,000 in the year 2000. Reminders of the desirability and availability of Aquinnah land constantly surface. An advertisement for 13 acres of subdividable land perched near Moshup Trail in Aquinnah for \$3.9 million appeared in the Gazette two weeks ago.

Town leaders got their own share of sticker shock in 1993 when a building plan denial on the south shore of Moshup Trail led to an option for town purchase.

"I think what happened in Aquinnah is now happening all over the Island. You have to compensate people for their land; you just don't stop development," Ms. Ottens-Sargent said.

Town leaders, in conjunction with Island conservation groups, raised nearly \$3.5 million to preserve undeveloped land and to secure conservation restrictions for land along Moshup's Trail.

Steep land values pose seemingly insurmountable obstacles for affordable housing activists in the town as well. While home prices creep into the millions, median income for Aquinnah residents is estimated at \$27,000 - well below the county's median income of \$40,000.

"We realized that people will be forced out if the town and agencies don't get busy," Aquinnah housing committee member Derrill Bazy said.

The Aquinnah housing committee set to work several years ago clearing clouded land titles in order to create youth lots for longtime town residents. The town devoted \$10,000 to the program each year, the exact price residents will pay for parcels sponsored by the resident homesite committee.

"Aquinnah made it a priority to keep people in the town rather than have a little more money in the budget," Mr. Bazy said, noting that the town could have simply resold land that the town foreclosed on.

Two residents received the first of the youth lots in February of 2001, and an unofficial list of 10 families wait for the housing committee to produce more youth lots.

Aquinnah has found a way to mesh affordable housing and conservation projects. "We're in a position to connect the dots," Mr. Bazy explained. "Affordable housing and conservation are seen as two halves of a whole. That's operational in Aquinnah."

With broad safeguards and numerous land limitations, Aquinnah residents most likely will never see 265 more homes planted in the tiny town. But the fear of mansions replacing camps and splotching the scenic vistas of the rural outpost pressures leaders in Aquinnah to closely monitor open tracks of land as well as the needs of the year-round community.

"If the idea of buildout is to help us find creative ways to corral the market, it's a good thing. But if it's used to close the door to any housing that's affordable, it will make it more difficult for the year-round community," Mr. Bazy said.

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