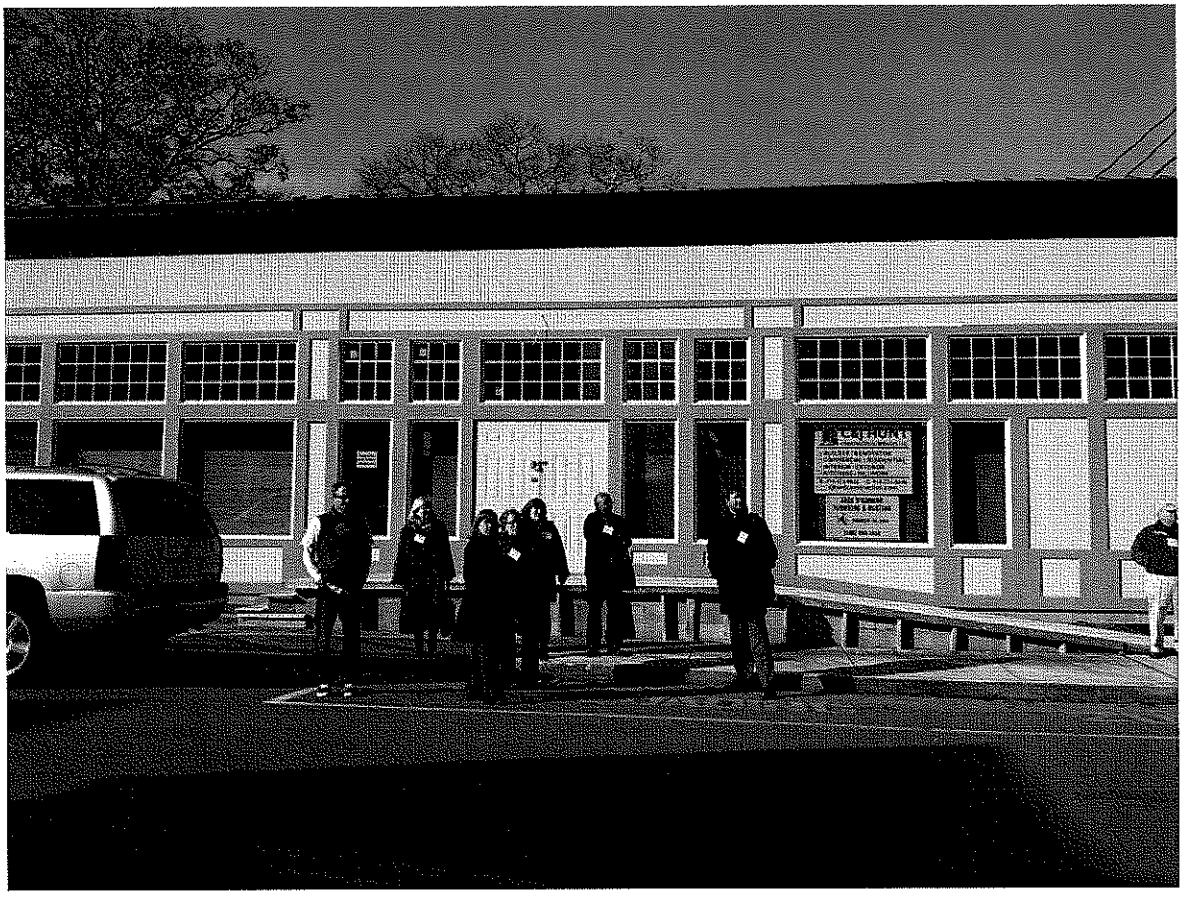
CIRCUIT AVENUE BUSINESS DISTRICT
PEER REVIEW
DECEMBER 3, 2013



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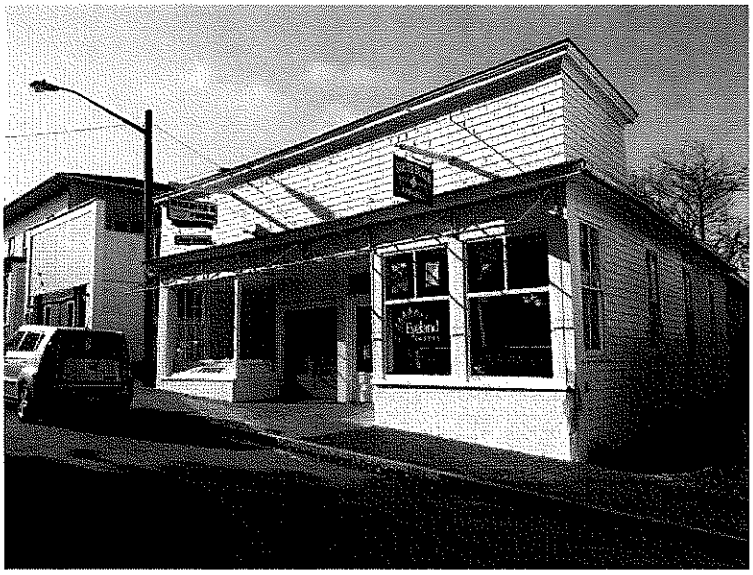
Oak Bluffs Business District Discussion

Through the Peer to Peer Program the Town of Oak Bluffs and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts pulled together a team of professionals to visit the Circuit Avenue Village District, address issues challenging the area, and make recommendations for the town to consider. The discussion below summarizes the results of this early December visit.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

At first glance the Circuit Avenue village business district has many of the desirables for a successful "place." Post Office, village grocer, public square with daily activities are all among the desirables that make people need to return regularly to the village. However, when you peel back the facade, does it really have the mixture of uses that make you WANT to return daily? While the village does not exude the sameness brought about by chain retailers, it does suffer an equal vacation resort sameness. T-shirt and sunglass shops stand side-by-side, much like you find in Hampton Beach, York Beach or along the Atlantic City Boardwalk.



Every tourist buying a t-shirt does not equal every tourist buying items everyday. The area needs diversity. To accomplish diversity requires buy-in by landowners and business people. Land use regulatory boards, generally, cannot make permitting decisions based upon competition. The plan for the area needs to provide the vision, private investors must cooperate to fulfill this vision.

Private investor cooperation is also part of the economic downturn in the Circuit Avenue village business district. New investments, such as the new ballroom, stand side-by-side with vacant movie theaters. These two vacant structures also grace the entry to the village. Dead space detracts from shoppers desires to walk any further. These two structures, located at the end of a

rather empty walk from the ferry terminals, deter people from walking into the village. A major public/private partnership is needed to reenergize these structures. Oak Bluffs may even want to consider creation of a redevelopment entity with adequate financial resources to quickly act to ensure vacant structures do not become a drain on nearby merchants. Additionally, the town may wish to initiate a "Blight" ordinance, providing a mechanism to penalize owners of buildings left to deteriorate.

Oak Bluffs needs to work to increase the economic vitality of the area by working to increase shoulder season activities, with an eye towards improving the year-round economy. As with nearby Cape Cod, there is little reason Oak Bluffs should not be considered an alternative to other vacations for Black Friday shopping; Christmas/New Years family gatherings; and school vacation alternatives to ski country. This might place added demands on businesses to promote the area as a winter destination, but through the direct marketing advantages of social media these costs are dropping. Creating email lists of customers, Facebook, Twitter and Constant Contact outreach all break down the barriers to such outreach. Ultimately a Business Improvement District, comprised of and led by the business people in the village can spearhead these efforts.

Growing the season into the shoulder and winter months faces one additional, significant, hurdle. A hurdle that will require outside intervention. The ferries virtually cease to serve Oak Bluffs in the off-season. Visitors are presently required, after October, to travel through neighboring Vineyard Haven, a village that has already fairly successfully connected its village frontdoor to the ferry terminal. Oak Bluffs needs the state to work with it to increase off-season Steamship Authority service to the community, or push for free off-season shuttles from Vineyard Haven to the village.

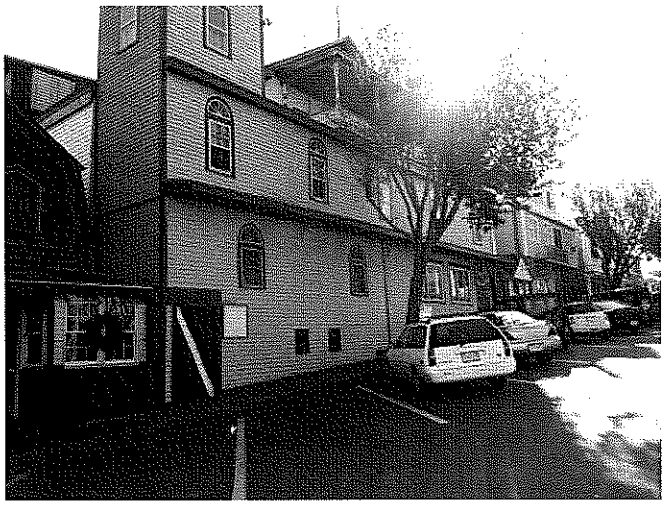
A few specific items to consider:

- ★ Within the overall scheme of connecting the ferry terminals to the the Circuit Avenue village business district a facilities plan should be developed. A few items need to be considered as part of this plan, these include:

- Design for improved walkways between the terminals and the village;
- Is there a better location, closer to the terminals, for disseminating tourist information;
- Disposition/reuse of the Police Station;
- Improved/more accessible public restrooms;
- Improved pedestrian facilities in the village business district.

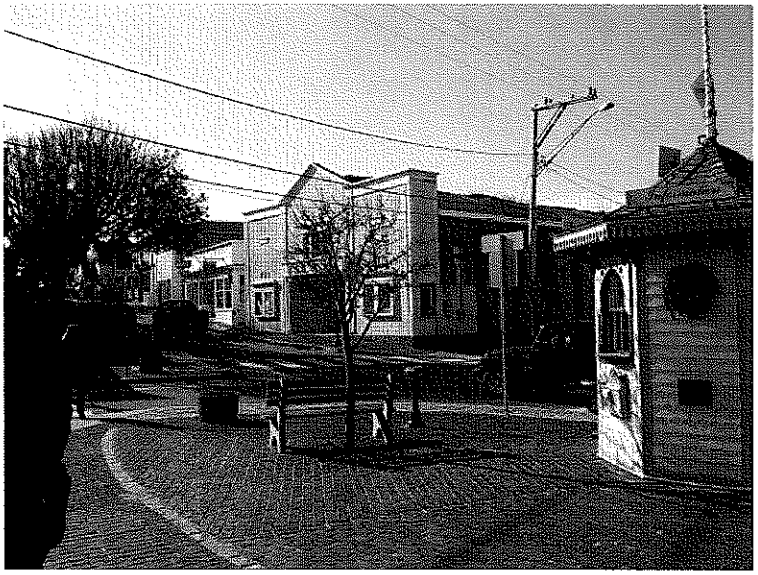
★ The Circuit Avenue village business district needs a coordinator (Business Improvement District [BID] Director perhaps, or a Redevelopment Committee) to promote the village. In particular, the village needs a web presence. Many free services exist to consider:
- A Facebook Page;
- Twitter;
- A blog through Blogger or Wordpress.

★ For a downtown there is nothing worse than dead walls, the town should consider adopting design standards to increase windows, and reduce dead wall areas.



- ★ Promote a year-round economy. First look to expand into the shoulder and holiday seasons. This will require outside cooperation from the Steamship Authority. Both the town and BID should target special events to these shoulders, much like Bourne with the Scallop Festival. Think, Halloween, Black Friday and Christmas season shopping, and school vacation promotions. On January 25, 2014 the Village hosted a very successful Chili Festival with 2,000 in attendance, The Festival was served by a free shuttle from the ferry terminal in Vineyard Haven, as noted in the tweet above. One of the winners traveled from Connecticut to compete. This one event reinforces many of our talking points, promote the off-season, use social media, and better connect the village through the SSA, and people will come.
- ★ Conduct a market analysis, understand the village's strong points (grocery store and post office) and weaknesses (sameness). Learn what could complement the village.
- ★ Branding, branding, branding. This coupled with using social media provides the village with an opportunity to sell the image the community wants to promote. The image could tie into the architectural style, history or vision of a walkable business district.
- ★ Increase housing opportunities by encouraging "top of the shop" housing in the village. As with the market analysis, the town should conduct a needs assessment and determine both year-round and seasonal affordability.

- ★ Today's society is technology driven, promoting free access to wi-fi, for instance, will encourage people to stay in the downtown for longer periods of time.
- ★ The two vacant theaters need special attention. The Village has strong connections to the arts. A special forum should be held specifically to address the re-use of these sites. Think out of the box. Uses such as a coffee-house with open mike; music lessons with recital performance space; an alcohol free club for high school bands to perform; "artsy movies like in Coolidge Corner; there are many ideas that could put these properties back into productive use.



- ★ Much of the Oak Bluffs economy is tourist driven. A quality, year-round, hotel is needed. It needs to be a place attractive to visitors whether it is ninety degrees outside or ten below. Year-round amenities are a must.

★ Finally, remember and emphasize the connection to the water.

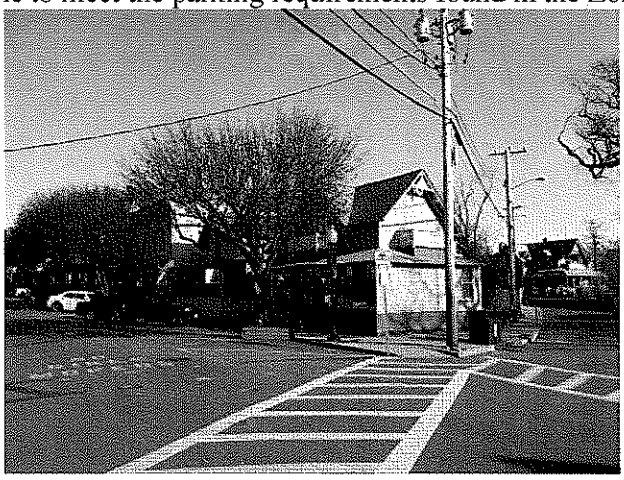
ZONING ISSUES

In general, the zoning, as with most zoning by-laws, is confusing and creates a difficult path for new investment. For instance, multiple jurisdictional paths must be followed to pursue changes in use:

- Height changes reviewed by the Board of Appeals and Oak Bluffs Historical Commission
- Special Permits for use reviewed by the Board of Appeals
- In addition to the Board of Appeals review some Special Permits will trigger review by the Site Plan Review Committee
- AND these Special Permits for use can also trigger Site Plan Review by the Planning

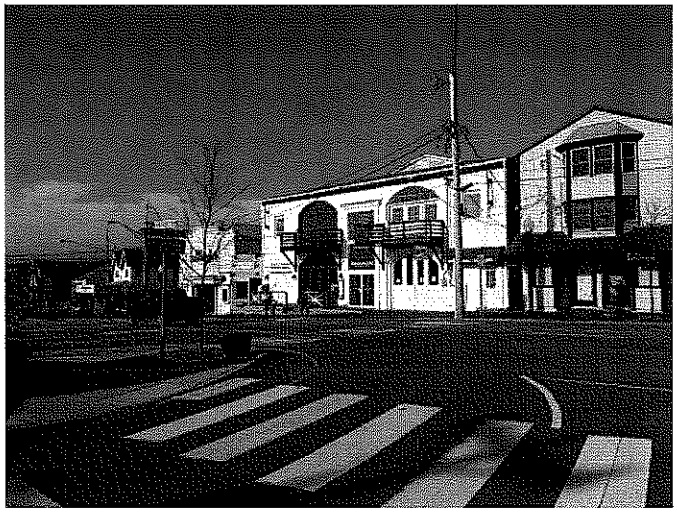
Board for Commercial Expansions over 500 sf

- Finally, in the B-1 District there is also special parking review by the Planning Board for properties unable to meet the parking requirements found in the Zoning By-law.



As if this level of review does not provide enough trepidation, projects may also trigger Martha's Vineyard Commission Development of Regional Impact review as well.

The B-1 district is also multi-headed; in the commercial downtown changes of use may be hindered in that they cannot provide additional parking. A parking fee in-lieu of spaces can be pursued, but annual costs are incurred under this scenario that could make long term decision making difficult, and make it easier to choose a non-downtown location over a downtown one. Excessive parking requirements, combined with long-term on-going costs, could lead to choosing open land along Dukes County Road or further out Circuit Avenue over the downtown.



Interestingly, when asked about these parking requirements, many in town either did not know it existed, or relayed it was not enforced.

A second issue in the B-1 District is that, according to the use table, while single family uses are

allowed, home occupations are not. While it is unclear how this may actually affect the Downtown Business District, the possibility of promoting incompatible uses side by side in the B-1 District should be reviewed.

A third important issue that arose during our visit revolved around "top of the shop" housing. This is another area where decision makers are interpreting the Zoning By-law as allowing such mixed uses, but it is not clearly spelled out in the by-law. In fact, the by-law, when it addresses conversion of multi-story structures to multi-family residential uses is quite clear it applies to full conversion.

In considering this housing provision, another issue arises. On the mainland, year-round affordability is a critical issue. While that remains a clear need in Oak Bluffs, there also needs to be some consideration of affordable seasonal employee housing as well.

Looking at some specific aspects of the Oak Bluffs zoning as it pertains to the downtown, we find what could be considered the "good, the bad and the ugly." Some examples.

GOOD

> "4.2.3 Special Rules in the B1 District. Any structure in existence at the time of the enactment of this Zoning By-law that is higher than 35 feet or within 5 feet of the front lot line shall not be considered a non-conforming structure for the purposes of any proposed alteration or change to said structure."

Providing conforming status to otherwise non-conforming structures can encourage re-investment as it clears one regulatory hurdle normally faced by investors. BUT:

BAD

> "4.2.8 Special Permit for Height in the B-1 District
> "The height of a building in the B-1 District shall not exceed 35 (thirty-five) feet except for the purpose of restoring or reproducing Victorian architectural features such as turrets or towers and/or decorative elements that extend above the main roof line. The Board of Appeals may grant a Special Permit in excess of 35 (thirty five) feet in dimensional height for such purpose if determined to be historically appropriate. In considering the Special Permit application, the Board of Appeals shall request comments from the Oak Bluffs Historical Commission on the appropriateness of the application. *(Section added ATM 4.12.06 Art 21, AG approved and published 7.17.06)"*

This provision effectively undoes much of what was accomplished with the preceding section discussed and highlights the first point made regarding a convoluted reviw process.

UGLY

A few of these for instance:

> Special Permit in the B-1 District. *(Section added STM 12.2.03 Art 16, AG Approved 3.26.04, Published 4.9.04)*
>
> Required Parking Uses in the B-1 District shall meet the off street parking requirements set forth in Section 5.1.1, herein.

Essentially this requirement establishes that uses in the downtown must provide the same number of parking spaces, on lots built out lot line to lot line, as uses building in less dense areas. To really meet this requirement in the downtown would require tearing down other buildings.

> SECTION 7.0 SPECIAL RESIDENTIAL REGULATIONS
>
> 7.2 CONVERSION OF AN EXISTING BUILDING TO APARTMENT UNITS
>
> 7.2.1 Conversion of Existing One or Two-Story Building. A one or two-story existing building may be converted to apartment units, subject to the following conditions:
>
> 7.2.2 Conversion of Existing Three-Story Building to Apartment Units. An existing three-story building may be converted to apartment units, subject to the following conditions:
>
> 7.2.3 Conversion and Expansion of Existing Building to Apartment Units. An existing building other than those set forth in Sections 7.2.1 or 7.2.2 may be converted to apartment units, subject to the following conditions:

This section only allows complete conversion of existing buildings into residential uses. There are no provisions for protecting the ground level retail uses, which, at least in the downtown, is important.

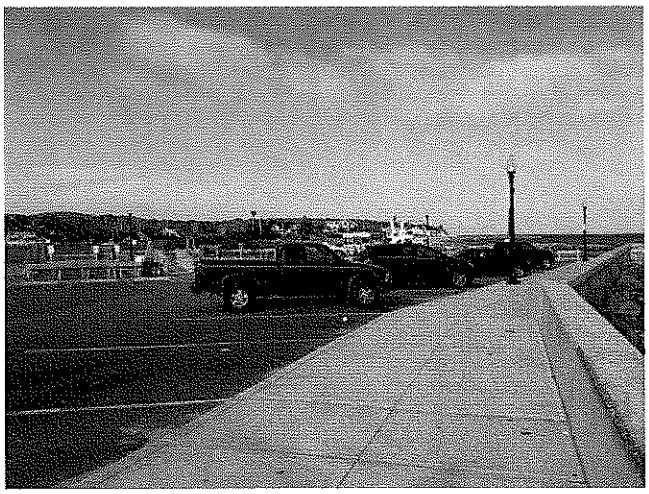
ZONING RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Consider the creation of a new "Downtown" zoning district.
2. Streamline the review process in the downtown, one-stop permitting.
3. Establish clear guidelines for permitting.
4. Establish architectural guidelines to promote the vision for the downtown and reduce the regulatory hurdles.
5. Downtown should limit new parking requirements.
6. At least in the Downtown zoning should explicitly allow mixed use development.
7. Mixed use zoning should preserve the street level commercial uses, and allow for upper story residential.

8. Address the need to balance housing opportunities to real needs, specifically balance year-round and seasonal housing needs as well as ensuring affordability in each category of housing.

ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

The concept of "place" is missing when one arrives at the Oak Bluffs ferry terminal area. Essentially, there is no "there" there. For instance, the gazebo is an iconic landmark recently featured on the cover of *Cape Cod Life*, but passengers arriving must fight rows upon rows of vehicles to approach it.



At present, either ferry entry is dominated by wide areas of asphalt designed for waiting vehicles to whisk away visitors before they ever arrive in the village. The concepts of "place," pedestrian accommodations and connectivity to the village center are lost. Overall, the town needs to reconsider how the visitor is first greeted when arriving on the ferries.

Parking tends to dominate Circuit Avenue. Vehicle space is allocated over 80% of the available space between building facades. Angle parking limits area available to pedestrians, bicyclists and even motorists. Sidewalks barely meet accessibility standards. The town needs to figure out what it wants the area to be. Is the vision of one with limited pedestrian opportunities or one that provides an enjoyable visit?

During the site visit the conflicting issues were quite evident. Conflict exists between the concept that ferry terminals in Oak Bluffs should serve the village first, or to rapidly remove visitors and whisk them away from the area without ever visiting the village. Clearly, from the perspective of the strength of the village, connections between the terminals and downtown need to be improved. The town needs to address this connection while also planning for the real needs of the Shuttle drivers.

Some of the ideas and recommendations are highlighted below:

- ★ A top priority for Oak Bluffs needs to be reaching an agreement on a vision for future pedestrian and vehicle circulation between the ferry services and the Circuit Avenue village area. The vision needs to recognize: 1) the importance of strengthening the connection between the ferry terminals and the Circuit Avenue village center businesses (signage, sidewalks); 2) the inadequacy of pedestrian facilities (shade, benches, etc.) ; 3) an integration of shuttle services into the fabric of the village.
- ★ The Circuit Avenue village is easily walkable from ferry services, beaches and numerous adjacent tourist accommodations. However, pedestrian facilities lack continuity and predictability. Sidewalks have been encroached upon by business access. Short-term and long-term solutions are necessary to meet these needs.
- ★ Before tackling permanent solutions in the Circuit Avenue village area the town should consider testing alternative. Some ideas are discussed below:
    - o Time of day parking restrictions. These could include complete or partial closures of parking in this area. For instance, the town could completely close off parking along Circuit Avenue using portable planters between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Or, the town could strategically close parking in targeted areas such as in front of the

Reliable Market or restaurants to allow these areas to be used to better serve and attract customers.

- Day of Week Restrictions. Similar to the Time of Day discussion, the town should consider whether the business district could be better served if parking was restricted during peak days, perhaps Friday, Saturday, Sunday and select Holidays.
- Partial parking restrictions could also be tested. Through the use of paint, planters and temporary wheelstops the town could convert angle parking into parallel parking. Such a change would reduce the number of parking spaces and eliminate delay caused by vehicles backing into Circuit Avenue traffic.
- Time of day vehicle restrictions: Similar to complete or partial closures of parking, all vehicles, with the exception of emergency services, would be re-routed to allow pedestrian-only traffic up Circuit Avenue during designated hours (ie. 11AM – 10PM_This works effectively in other cities including the Downtown Crossing area in Boston, Burlington VT, Quebec City to name a few).

★ The town should work with the shuttle services that currently serve the ferry terminal area to better serve the village. The rearranging of the terminal area could be coupled with a new plan to serve shuttles to and from the area hotels. Such a plan could better connect the terminal, hotels and the village to one another.

★ The town should also work with the shuttle operators, Martha's Vineyard Regional Transit Authority and village businesses to add new shuttle services as well. The lower the fare, or fare-free services, would be the best approach. The town and the Martha's Vineyard Commission should explore the use of federal congestion mitigation or rural transit funding to provide such a service. Perhaps, the service could model itself on the "user-side subsidy" taxi service operated in Exeter NH in the early to mid-1980's. In that case-study, the town provided residents with tickets accepted by the taxi providers to drive residents to and from designated destinations. The taxi providers submitted the tickets to the town for reimbursement. For Oak Bluffs, hotels and businesses could distribute tickets to guests and customers with minimum purchase amounts.

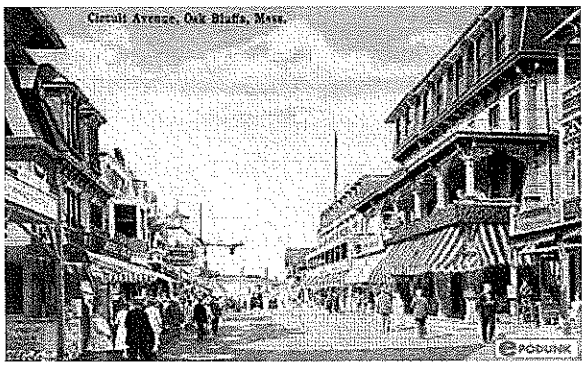
★ A transportation management organization should be considered to coordinate all travel

needs. Such an entity could coordinate shuttle services, identify and promote satellite parking facilities and promote pedestrian and bicycle travel.

WAYFINDING/WALKABILITY:

Beyond the accessibility discussion above, there are significant issues the town needs to consider. There are missing portions to critical sidewalks. The walk from the ferry terminals is considered unattractive. Directional signs are lacking, especially at the terminal area. Some basic ideas were floated during the site visit that could benefit village walkability. These are highlighted below:

- ★ Inventory the sidewalk network. Prioritize closing the gaps in the sidewalk network to ensure pedestrian connections can be met.
- ★ Make the walk attractive. The walk, especially between the ferry terminal and the Circuit Avenue business district lacks protection from the road or the elements. Making the walk attractive will be an interesting challenge. Features, whether structural or vegetative, needs to recognize, and be in harmony with the architectural styles found nearby. In addition, the treatment chosen should not obstruct the views that bring visitors to the town to begin with. In order to make the walk attractive a visual inventory should be undertaken to ensure the walk is designed to enhance the visitors complete experience when visiting the island.
- ★ The town needs to explore the creation of a complete wayfinding system. This system needs to combine both low-tech, traditional signage, and hi-tech, QR Codes for smartphones, approaches. The wayfinding system needs to start at the ferry terminal or even on the boats. Paper maps and QR Codes for village businesses should be available on the boats and at the landside facilities. Businesses should incorporate QR Codes into their store windows. Wayfinding signs need to be located at strategic locations throughout the village and between the village and the terminal. These signs should incorporate both distance and walking time.
- ★ Eliminate parking in strategic locations to reveal the "lost architectural wonders" of Oak Bluffs. One location that was raised during the visit was parking in front of the carousel which is lost behind parked vehicles.
- ★ It was noted that a boardwalk has been proposed near the Steamship Authority Terminal. Branding the village as part of the wayfinding recommendation should be incorporated into the boardwalk project.



DESIGN

During the day-long meetings and site tours, many questions and observations focused on design within the district. The design topics included:

- ★ Urban Design – the overall composition of the district and the interplay between buildings, streets, open spaces and the waterfront that distinguishes Oak Bluffs.
- ★ Architectural Design – the character of both the historic and more contemporary buildings.
- ★ Streetscape Design – the composition of the streets and ways that create the public realm for people to walk, bicycle, and drive through the community.
- ★ Landscape Design – the characteristics of the distinctive open spaces.

The existing design character associated with each of these topics provides remarkable contrasts in image, quality, and character.

There are many positive characteristics, and it is fundamentally important to understand and preserve those aspects of Oak Bluffs and the Circuit Avenue business district that are distinctive and contribute to the quality of the experience for residents and visitors.

- ★ Architecture – The architectural heritage of Oak Bluffs is remarkable. Not only is this heritage the basis of preservation that will need to be a continuing priority, but the heritage can also serve as an inspiration for the future as part of renovations and designs. As a summer retreat, the Victorian-era "resort architecture" is a compelling aspect of the district's image. But the history of the Campground with its architectural evolution and composition of buildings, paths, and open spaces creates a unique design dimension that needs to be appreciated and taken into account in the urban design of the district's future.
- ★ Waterfront edge – New improvements including renovations to the restrooms, public fishing pier, and landscape enhancements are recapturing some of the waterfront edge so that it is an accessible amenity. Additional initiatives are being pursued that will continue the transformation over time.
- ★ Joining the parts and places – The district is centered within a compact village. The waterfront, the harbor, the Campground, Ocean Park, and nearby neighborhoods each have very different identities and all are within a few steps of each other.

Unfortunately, there are many aspects of the visual environment that are unattractive and do not reflect the potential of the community.

As discussed earlier with regard to accessibility, the visitor to Oak Bluffs is first greeted by a sea of asphalt. The first public building encountered is the Police Station, which does not send a "Welcome to Oak Bluffs" message. This area should be the historic gateway to Oak Bluffs. Instead, it is the expressway to leaving Oak Bluffs. Travelers are not encouraged to come into Oak Bluffs. They are encouraged to by-pass the village instead. As discussed earlier, a new plan is needed for the shuttle services and streets between the ferry terminals, and the village needs to be redesigned to improve pedestrian facilities and visual character.

Other design-related issues within the district include:

- ★ Deterioration and maintenance – There are notable buildings and façades that have deteriorated, are vacant, or are visibly lacking maintenance. There were various accounts of why this may be occurring, but the impacts are clear and negative.
- ★ Harbor edge and gateway – As an activity center and gateway to the community, the harbor edge has compelling components that lend themselves to improvement so that this area is repositioned to be more a "front door" than the "back door" appearance it has today.
- ★ Signage and wayfinding – Despite its role as a major tourism destination, the lack of clear and useful orientation signage is striking. Because the pedestrian and vehicular flows are well-defined, the district has many opportunities for creating signage and wayfinding systems to create a better experience for visitors – and provide enhanced marketing for the businesses and destinations within the district.
- ★ Public spaces –Some of the public spaces are poorly maintained and lacking in basic pedestrian amenities that would enhance the visual quality of the district and the

experience of their users.

★ Streetscape issues – In addition to the pragmatic circulation and safety issues that have been discussed, the design of most of the streetscapes does not reinforce the activities, image or experience of pedestrians. In many locations, the streetscape is not supportive of the adjacent enterprises and activities; sidewalks in many locations provide inadequate space and present uneven and deteriorated surfaces. The streetscape trees and adjacent plantings are mismatched with the activities and areas that surround them in some locations.

A series of observations and recommendations emerged during the day and during the final group discussions for consideration by the community and the stewards of its future. These included the following:

★ Providing for the unusual and distinctive design quality of Oak Bluffs – The design standards for the district need to be specifically tailored to the unique qualities that make this community such a distinctive place, and allow for the inspiration and creativity that is associated with its picturesque roots and individual expression within a basic framework of good design.

★ Design standards and a clear, consolidated review and approval process – Preserving and enhancing distinctive design characteristics can be accomplished through a well-managed design review process that is based on clear and appropriate design standards. Design standards should provide positive information that guides project proposals and serves as a shared basis for reviewing and approving projects so that proponents know what to expect, and not be subject to multiple, lengthy, or potentially conflicting directions and requirements.

★ Architecture and the harbor gateway – The arrival and departure area for passenger-only ferries within the harbor would benefit from architectural components that

visually mark the transition from vessel to shore, provide shelter, and modify the large expanse of asphalt that appears to be too large relative to pedestrian needs, and awkwardly laid out relative to the pick-up, drop-off, and circulation functions in the area.

- ★ Streetscape for pedestrians – In a predominately pedestrian area, the streetscape should be reconsidered and can be redesigned to support its many roles – as a place to walk, stroll, sit, shop, eat, and enjoy watching the passing scene.
- ★ Programs to require and encourage maintenance – Poor maintenance and deterioration need to be corrected and trends of neglect reversed. There are a number of methods that have been used successfully by other communities including "carrots" to provide incentives for building owners to "sticks" that make sure that problems are not a public safety hazard. Oak Bluffs can consider how other communities have solved similar problems, and adopt an approach that will most effective for this Town.
- ★ Quality civic spaces – the public spaces include connectors or small pockets of open areas; they can be substantially improved to be more comfortable, welcoming, and attractive.
- ★ The unusual interaction of real estate economics, design, and development in a seasonal community – It is important to appreciate the unusual market forces that influence the feasibility of renovations or improvements and the use patterns in seasonal conditions like Oak Bluffs. When income is concentrated within a few short months, it may appear that business is prosperous and can support high quality improvements. However, balanced against the long months of low – or no – business, many owners and establishments may have real difficulty in funding or financing improvements. In addition, the volume of business during peak season may not be as dependent upon the exterior appearance of storefronts and buildings. As a result, addressing design deficiencies and vacancies must take into account the economic factors, and may need to include special measures to serve as incentives or assistance to upgrade deteriorated properties, or properties at risk.
- ★ Wayfinding and interpretation – There are many creative ways to provide basic wayfinding that visitors need to navigate to, from, and through the district; these possibilities should be explored. In this regard, concepts that string together multiple destinations and points of interest can be created to extend and connect walking routes, attracting patrons to outlying businesses – and telling the compelling stories of Oak Bluffs history and culture.
- ★ Art and cultural expression – There are many opportunities to engage the artistry of islanders and visually express the destinations, cultural heritage, and delight associated with Oak Bluffs and its role in the life of Martha's Vineyard; other communities have successfully incorporated imaginative ways to make this part of the streetscape and public places, and Oak Bluffs could consider approaches that would be appropriate.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Since the workshop, the newspapers have provided a forum for discussion of the issues raised. One interesting hindsight is, many of the ideas discussed are in use, just not quite at the scale needed for the Circuit Avenue Business District to take advantage. MVTWEETS, used as an

example in this report provides Twitter access for Oak Bluffs businesses, but you have to wade through all the tweets put out for the rest of the island to find them. Free shuttle transit has been used to promote off-season activity in the town. The tools are there, the seeds for the future were planted before we visited in December 2013. Hopefully, this effort provides the nurturing necessary to promote the open discourse that is needed to move the community forward.

But, remember, it will not turn around overnight. As in other villages, the descent was long and slow, the climb back to prosperity need not be as long, but it will not happen overnight as well. Critical public/private discussions, towards creation of a partnership, all working for the best of the Circuit Avenue area must take place. Public investment, no matter how small, can spur private investment. What is needed is for everyone to see there is a desire to make it better. That desire has spurred revivals in Hyannis and Dennis Port and can also accomplish the same in the Circuit Avenue area.