



# TOWN OF OAK BLUFFS

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## Board of Selectmen

Brian C. Packish, *Chairman*  
Jason Balboni  
Gail M. Barmakian  
Gregory A. Coogan  
Michael J. Santoro

April 27, 2020

Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard and  
Nantucket Steamship Authority Board  
PO Box 284  
Woods Hole, MA 02543

Robert L. Whritenour, Jr.  
*Town Administrator*

James M. Malkin, Chairman  
Kathryn Wilson, Vice Chairman  
Moirra E. Tierney, Secretary  
Robert F. Ranney  
Robert R. Jones

### **RE: Repairs to the Oak Bluffs Steamship Authority Pier**

Honorable Members of the Board:

The Board of Selectmen of the Town of Oak Bluffs has been alarmed to learn so soon before the planned start of the summer season of the deteriorated condition of many pilings at the Oak Bluffs Steamship Authority Pier. As a major summer resort community this condition absolutely threatens our economic lifeline by jeopardizing travel into our port. It is unfathomable how this much deterioration could be unknown until less than a month prior to the scheduled opening of the Pier. The Authority's capital budget, which was approved last fall appropriated the funds necessary to complete this work. Why wasn't the bidding conducted earlier to avoid a conflict with the upcoming season?

There is no question that this damage must be corrected, at an absolute minimum, on a temporary basis to allow service into Oak Bluffs for the summer season, until more permanent repairs may be accomplished in the fall. It should be pointed out that the first half of this project was carried out in 2008, with the full understanding that the balance of the work would be completed within a few years. Until a month ago we relied on the season beginning on May 15th, then we were told you might have to close the port, then that the port would open on June 15, after which the date was moved to June 22, and that date is only provisional upon receiving a favorable bid.

The Town has always been a cooperative partner in all of the Steamship Authority's projects, including the favorable leasing of Town property to accommodate staging, ticket sales and drop-offs. We have worked in conjunction with the SSA to improve the visitor and rider experience of easy on and off access for passengers and vehicles not only to improve the visitor experience, but also to help strengthen our relationship with the SSA in hopes of bringing more boats and extending the season with earlier and later schedules, not to lose ferry service all together!

Over the past 6 years, we have spent millions of dollars of local and state resources in a

coordinated plan to improve and augment our infrastructure around our SSA port. For every dollar spent on these projects, we knew we would be looking at greater revenues and economic growth for our Town. These projects have included:

1. Planning and construction with the Mass DCR of the Fishing Pier.
2. Creation of the North Bluff Boardwalk allowing walking off the boat being able to walk around the harbor, beaches, Circuit Avenue downtown, Arts District, historical sites, Camp Meeting Association cottages.
3. Recent restoration of the North Bluff Beach right up to the SSA terminal. Visitors can now relax at the beach while waiting for the ferry.
4. Streetscape project for downtown signage and branding, with the SSA involved in the way finding project at every step.
5. Partnership to develop park and ride.
6. The only port where we place 100% of our embarkation fees in the police department budget for direct services to provide traffic control on and off the boats. The Town schedules a minimum of 3-4 officers moving traffic during peak times. It has been noted by many visitors how smooth a transition it is getting off the ferry with no traffic back up. The Town hears that praise frequently, and it is due to our commitment to support the SSA operations.
7. All of the funding in this area has been the result of our commitment to the partnership with our local transportation authority in connecting visitors through walking and connecting visitors to our downtown. Through this commitment our port provides a high-quality passenger experience like no other port the SSA operates.

While we are aware of the much-publicized financial difficulties of the Steamship Authority as a result of the lack of ridership this spring due to the COVID-19 virus, this cannot be used as reasoning to abandon Oak Bluffs for the summer. This community is also suffering from the complete economic shut-down which was required to battle the virus. Our entire seasonal economy consists of small businesses depending on the arrival of visitors to stay afloat. Most of these businesses are facing great difficulty as a result of the closures, waiting for the opportunity to reopen to salvage a portion of the upcoming season and remain viable. To use the virus as a means for closing down Oak Bluffs for the year would multiply this damage and certainly be the death-knell for so very many of our local businesses. The Town would take years to recover from such a catastrophe.

It is not true that visitors may be evenly distributed throughout the Island from a single point of entry. Our traffic and transportation resources are stretched to the maximum limit, and we simply do not have the infrastructure to absorb all travel through a single port. The port communities of Tisbury and Oak Bluffs work together to safely accommodate visitors to the Island in a way that is beneficial to the entire Island. Removing a critical link in this transportation network does irreparable harm to both communities. It is difficult enough that the pier repairs will extend our shut-down until the middle of June, but it will kill our Town to close for the entire year.

In light of the financial difficulties caused by the late opening of the pier, the Board further requests that during the repair period until the June opening, the Steamship Authority institutes foot-traffic service utilizing the Sea Streak side of the pier with a similar-sized vessel to at least offer a modicum of service to help assist our business community in getting back on their feet following this disastrous spring.

The Board knows that you are aware of the importance of the ferry service, which is the lifeline for our Island town, and together we have been battling unprecedented challenges in coping with the realities of the COVID-19 virus. We simply ask that you not abandon our historic resort community in its hour of greatest need as we struggle to reopen our economy following such an economic shock.

In closing we strongly request the Steamship Authority's immediate action in addressing the critical issue of reopening the Oak Bluffs pier, and we request that the Authority recognizes the long-term economic impacts that will be caused by using the COVID-19 virus as a vehicle to inflict even more damage on our community.

Sincerely,

For the Oak Bluffs Board of Selectmen,

Brian Packish, Chairman

cc: Senator Julian Cyr  
Representative Dylan Fernandes  
George J. Balco, Port Council Chairman  
Robert B. Davis, General Manager