

Nantucket Tiny Houses are a Big Deal

by Mary Bergman

Isaiah Stover is on track to be a Nantucket folk hero -- he is the man behind the tiny house movement on an island dotted with McMansions and median home prices of \$1.2 million.

Stover drafted the bylaw amendment to change the Zoning Code of the Town of Nantucket to include tiny house units -- a dwelling of less than 500 square feet built on a moveable trailer -- passed by a two-thirds voice vote at Saturday's Annual Town Meeting.

Stover has developed a following over the past year among islanders searching for an alternative solution to the affordable housing crisis. In 2015, he drafted an earlier version of the bylaw amendment, only to decide not to call the article on Town Meeting floor. The idea was good, but needed more time to mature. Stover sought out the naysayers and critics for input.



Isaiah Stover

"I wanted to find the people who criticized the article and listen to their concerns. And, they were great concerns," Stover said. He was able to draft a stronger article with protections and provisions that could satisfy

both the town and the tiny house owner.

The amendment stood up to 45 minutes of debate before the affirmative vote. Community members spoke out in favor of tiny houses, some sharing personal stories of their struggles to find secure housing on the island. Former Health Inspector **Richard Ray** rose in support of tiny houses, as did Selectman **Matt Fee**. Some critics of the tiny homes urged Stover to take yet another year to hone the legislation, but the town meeting body was ready to vote.

The message from the voters was clear -- not enough was being done, so why not give this a try?

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Tiny houses are a big deal nationwide. There are six cable television shows currently dedicated to the building, buying, selling of, and living in tiny houses. Isaiah Stover doesn't have a TV, so he has not seen them.

Stover had his first taste of tiny living while hiking the Long Trail in Vermont in the summer of 2009. There, he met Aidan O'Shea of Sheady Acres who was building super efficient "micro-houses" to rent out to hikers and skiers. Stover returned to Sheady Acres years later and stayed at the now completed cottage colony.

"After seeing that, I knew what you could do with small spaces," Stover said.

Stover is no stranger to life in close quarters. Childhood summers were spent in an itsy-bitsy cottage in Pocomo. "We were packed in like sardines," Stover said, recalling all six children in his family sharing one room. "But some of the best memories of my life happened there."

Not surprisingly, it was Stover's mother, longtime Town Clerk **Catherine Flannigan Stover**, who encouraged him to put pen to paper and turn his ideas into legislation. Isaiah's father, **John Stover**, president of the Nantucket Rotary Club, is an engineer who encouraged Stover to seek out alternative energies in considering designs for future tiny houses.

John Stover spoke on Town Meeting floor in support of his son's article. The backing from such a respected member of the community was not lost on the voting body, nor on Isaiah. "It was an emotional moment for me," Stover said, "I got the "Attaboy," I got that pat on the back."

"My parents, no matter what I've done, throughout life, they've always supported me in my endeavors. Whatever it may be. They always stand behind me."

And he's stood behind them, too. Stover recalled a childhood memory where he went dumpster-diving behind a church that was throwing away donated clothes that were too beat-up to give to needy parishioners. "So I had a little yard sale in front of my parents house, trying to raise money because my mother wanted a microwave oven," Stover said.

Service is in his blood. Stover's great grandfather served on the Nantucket Housing Authority in the 1940s and 1950s, working to create the housing development that is today Gold Star Drive near the Sparks Avenue rotary. Its original occupants were returning World War II veterans.

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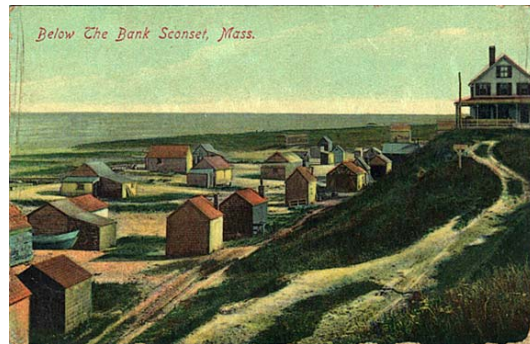
Affordable housing is not a new problem on Nantucket, Stover is quick to point out. We are just feeling the effects more acutely now.

"I would call this a runaway housing crisis," Stover said. "The available units for rentals are getting more and more limited. Summer people are buying in what were traditionally year round neighborhoods. That's becoming the norm now. When that happens, a year rounder is pushed out of the neighborhood, and they have to look for a place to go."

That "place to go" might be a friend's couch, or the backseat of their car. Homelessness is a hidden problem on Nantucket, Stover said. Many chose to leave the island when faced with these alternatives.

"I saw the tiny houses as an option for people to actually be able to get into home ownership on Nantucket," Stover explained. With single family homes selling in the six-and-seven hundred thousands on the lower end, tiny houses could be an important middle step for a household to save money for a down payment while side-stepping the skyrocketing rental market.

Perhaps on Nantucket more than anywhere, there is a historical precedent for tiny houses. The rose-covered cottages of 'Sconset are romanticized in the island's history books, forever preserved by the HDC. Who hasn't ambled down Front Street's crushed shell path and peered into the wavy glass windows, imagining the lives of all who have lived in these homes squeezed together at the edge of the world?



Nantucket postcard c. 1905

Stover says the "bigger is better" mentality now favored both on and off island began in the post war boom of the 1950s. With a larger living space came more furniture and more *things* to fill up the bigger house.

People are more aware of their effect on the environment these days. There is a desire to live greener and smarter, and one of the easiest ways to do that is to live smaller.

One advantage of building a tiny house on a trailer is a trailer has a title and the structure on it belongs to the title holder, not whoever owns the land the tiny house may be parked on.

Stover knows that tiny house living is not for everybody. Yet for single people, couples, and smaller families it can be a good fit. You have to be a certain kind of person to be willing to live small, but then again, "you have to be a certain kind of person to live 30 miles out to sea," Stover said.

Nantucketers have a history of being creative problem solvers, Stover explained.

"Think about going out to sea for five years just to be able to take care of your family," Stover said, invoking the island's whaling history and willingness of its people to do what it takes to survive.

Stover rebuffs the idea that tiny houses are just a fad.

"We have this ideology that if you work hard, you go to school, and you get a job, you can be part of the American Dream," Stover remarked, "That's a sham." These days, most people graduate with student loan debt, so out of the starting gate they are at a disadvantage from previous generations. There is no traditional course that one can plot for success anymore, Stover believes. But we can chart a new course.

On an island with no public campground, the biggest hurdle Stover faced was changing people's perceptions about what a tiny house on a trailer might look like. The very mention of a wheeled trailer conjures up images of RVs, double-wides, and silver-bellied Airstreams.

Stover is adamant that the tiny homes will be built with Nantucket in mind, just on a micro-scale. If the house sits on a poured foundation, the wheels and axles won't be seen. If it is on a pier foundation, the wheels and axles can be removed. (Town Counsel John Giorgio said whimsically at Town Meeting that that the wheels could be stored in a "tiny basement.") Landscaping, a deck, or skirt can be used to obscure any unsightly undercarriage.

To those who fear tiny houses that travel on wheels, Stover remarked, "This isn't going to be a caravan -- people aren't going to summer in 'Sconset, winter in Madaket, and spend some time in town once it quiets down." The infrastructure required for a tiny home, whether it's hooking up to the sewer or installing a Title V septic system, means that homeowners are looking to put down roots. The whole point of tiny homes, Stover reminds, is to put an end to the "Nantucket shuffle" of moving every six months.

While a tiny house is a less expensive path towards homeownership than a traditional home on Nantucket, a tiny house owner will certainly incur many costs. "There is a real expense to building one of these," Stover said. Owning a tiny house will be a commitment not unlike owning a traditional home. The way Stover's amendment is written, tiny homes on Nantucket will be built according to International Building Code regulations, just as any home on the island is.



Isaiah Stover's Tiny House

So, what's next for the Tiny House Guy?

Stover, a member of Nantucket's Affordable Housing Trust Fund, is running for Housing Authority. A licensed builder under the Department of Public Safety, Stover knows the ins and outs of the regulatory process when it comes to construction on Nantucket. He'd love to be involved as a tiny house builder or consultant to help others navigate the process.

Many hopeful tiny-homeowners are celebrating the passage of Stover's amendment, yet he wants people to be cautious. The Massachusetts Attorney General (AG) must review the amendment before it is rewritten into the zoning bylaw. Stover believes this is the first tiny house bylaw that will cross the AG's desk, and is hopeful the AG will approve the bylaw by September. When a citizen petition has a two-thirds affirmative vote, the AG often approves as "it's what the people want," Stover said.

Of course, a tiny house needs land to rest on. Stover believes homeowners on traditional lots who would like the extra income a second or third dwelling provides will be able to lease land to tiny homeowners.

Nantucket is in the middle of an affordable housing crisis, of that there is no question. Stover sees tiny houses as one solution. "It's not *the* solution," he said, "It's one tool in the toolbox."

"Everybody deserves dignity and a roof over his or her head," Stover remarked. With the passage of his tiny house amendment, Nantucket is one step closer to solving an enormous problem.

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