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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters must be received **by noon Tuesday** for publication in that week's paper. Letters may be handwritten, typed or emailed to don@nantucketindependent.com. Be sure to include an address and phone number. All letters are printed at the editor's discretion and may be edited.

CALENDAR

The calendar section includes free listings and photos of island events. Email your event listing to Gene Mahon, events@nantucketindependent.com. Fax: 508-228-4858. Listings and photos for consideration must be received **by 5 p.m. Friday**.

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Provide either your own pre-written announcement or fill out one of our forms and we will write it for you. Announcements and photos are printed free of charge. Forms are available at The Independent, and may be faxed or emailed. Call 508.228.1654, or email sharon@nantucketindependent.com. Announcements and photos must be received **by 5 p.m. Friday**.

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Direct news tips, information and questions to: Don Costanzo, Editor, 508.228.1654, don@nantucketindependent.com.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS

Please direct orders and address changes to: Sharon Liburd or Dan Drake, 508.228.1654, sharon@nantucketindependent.com, drake@nantucketindependent.com

THANKS FOR GIFTS GIVEN

The holidays are over, but Nantucket has just received another present. Mitchell's Book Corner, one of the redoubtable presences on Main Street, has a new lease — literally — on life. The building and the business have been purchased with the idea of keeping the bookstore viable and the deal has been structured so that the new operators should be able to make a go of it.

For the time being, and hopefully for a long time, the bookstore will remain. There is nothing wrong with art galleries, real estate offices or jewelry stores — in moderation. But Main Street already has at least two of each of those categories and another fixture, Congdon's Pharmacy, has left. Thus, the idea that one of the venerable uses of main streets anywhere will continue to exist in Nantucket is heartwarming.

How did this happen? It happened because someone who cares wanted it to happen and has the wherewithal to make it happen. It happened because someone didn't want to squeeze the last dollar out of the deal.

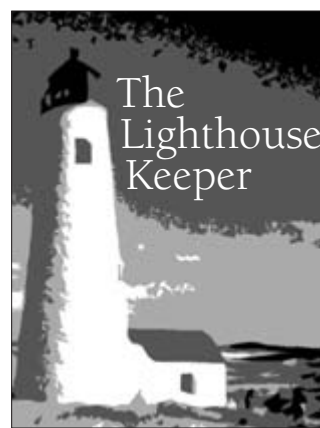
For several months, Nantucket has been hit with one piece of news after another about someone stepping in to "rescue" a property or a project — the Dreamland, the Frost development on Eel Point Road, the bus hub and now Mitchell's. The news of the first three was greeted, respectively, with relief, awe and a combination of surprise and, in some quarters, annoyance. In this latest case, it is hard to imagine that anyone, even the owner of Nantucket Bookworks, the town's other wonderful bookstore, would be upset at the news that Mitchell's will continue to hold down its corner on Main Street.

Even though the Mitchell's transaction was entirely private, with no implications to the town government, it does force further focus on the question as to what role, if any, the Town of Nantucket and its officials have in these philanthropic efforts

The *New York Times* has been running a sometimes series over the last several months called the "Age of Riches." For the most part, the series has focused on individuals who have amassed considerable wealth and what they have done with their money and how it may, or may not have affected their lives. However, coincidentally, this past Sunday's installment of the series, under the headline "With Public Works Languishing, Private Cash Sets the Urban Agenda" provided some interesting food for thought in the context of what has been going on in Nantucket of late.

The article focused on how Yale University, the biggest landowner and largest employer in New Haven, is spending billions of private dollars to refurbish and expand its infrastructure, while the City of New Haven is unable to complete some of its own infrastructure projects or embark on any new ones, much less maintain what it has. Yale has made relatively modest contributions to refurbish New Haven's infrastructure (streets and sidewalks) within the campus area, but does not contribute anything to its broader infrastructure needs and certainly not to the city's wish list of things it would like to do. Yale also does not pay real estate taxes to the city.

The article distinguishes between the focus of private philanthropy on infrastructure — in the article's case the infrastructure of culture, higher education and recreation; in Nantucket's case recently, the infrastructure of culture/recreation, conservation and the quality of life — and



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the public sector's infrastructure which is the physical plant of highways, transportation facilities, public schools and the like.

The *Times* points out that, as a percentage of gross domestic product, public sector spending on infrastructure has fallen by one-third in the last 30 years. In significant part, this is due to the substantially reduced ability of localities to tap into federal funds which played such an important role in funding the interstate highway system, clean

water facilities and other public works efforts in the 1950s and '60s. Nantucket recently found this out when it discovered it would itself have to pay virtually the entire cost of its two new wastewater treatment plants instead of getting reimbursement of 90 percent or so from the federal government as it did the last time.

The good news is that Nantucket has a rich tradition of individuals taking significant steps and devoting substantial resources to making things better. There have been many such people, among them the early pioneers of the land conservation effort in the 1950s, Walter Beinecke providing the island with some economic viability in the 1960s and, most recently, the Robin Hoods of 2007-08 who have come to the rescue, *inter alia*, to preserve two of the island's 20th century icons.

The interesting question is where this philanthropy leaves the Town of Nantucket, the entity charged with taking care of our basic physical infrastructure. While the comparison may be odious to some, it would seem that, on its present course, the local government risks becoming more and more like New Haven in its relationship with Yale. As in the case of New Haven, the town will remain responsible for providing basic services, but these will become more and more stretched as the amount of the town's annual budget available for discretionary spending becomes smaller and the cost of capital needs increases. In effect the town's role becomes more and more marginalized as private money is spent around it, even if the money is being spent on infrastructure of a sort which typically has not been within the town's purview.

As the "discretionary" money available to the town becomes scarcer, the temptation is for officialdom to move in on private projects and put its own spin on them. A lesson can be taken from the accusation made last week that Boston's mayor, Thomas Menino, micromanages private development projects proposed for the city. The risk, of course, in Nantucket or anywhere, is that the urban philanthropist will back away if the process becomes too odious.

Steps must be taken to try to insure that the public sector and the private sector work together to secure the best outcome for everyone with the dollars spent. The role of the town is to encourage efforts like the one to save the bookstore, the movie theater or the character of important land and, especially, to help with efforts to support infrastructure like a bus depot which is usually the town's responsibility, and maybe even provide modest incentives to help these efforts along. To adapt to playing a useful role will require some effort and investment of time by the town.

In the meantime, let us rejoice that the light remains on at Mitchell's Book Corner. ■

The "Lighthouse Keeper" reflects the views of the author and does not necessarily represent the editorial position of The Nantucket Independent. Please send any ideas or comments to drake@nantucketindependent.com.

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