

Put your information in The Independent

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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Provide us with your child's name, date of birth, name of parents, siblings and grandparents. You may submit a photo or drop by the office anytime during normal business hours and we will take the photo for you. Must be received **by 5 p.m. Friday**. Email: don@nantucketindependent.com

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

MAYBE

At a dinner party last weekend, our hostess and I had a brief discussion about the three "Non-Binding Public Opinion Advisory Question(s) Pursuant to MGL chapter 53 section 18A" that are on the ballot which we who vote here on Nantucket will be confronted with next week. What came of the discussion was that we were in accord on renewable energy but that we would agree to disagree on the other two questions. However, there was some hesitancy on the part of my discussion partner with respect to at least one of them, "Well, if such-and-such, perhaps I would be in favor of so-and-so," and almost downright agreement on the other if the question had been worded differently.

The non-binding questions on the ballot are framed so that they require a "yes" answer or a "no" answer. There is no room for a write-in. There is no opportunity for equivocation. There are no shades of gray. The issue is either black or it is white.

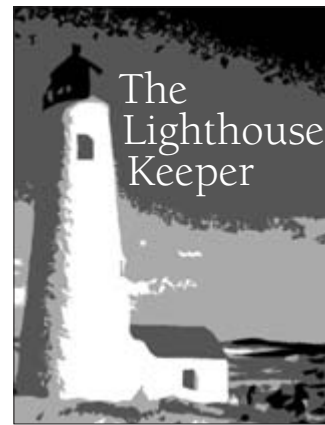
A reading of the aforementioned section of the Massachusetts General Law proves interesting. The section is all about how the question gets on the ballot. It says absolutely nothing about the form of the question. There is no guidance as to whether the question is to be yes/no, multiple-choice or require an essay. As a practical matter, our voting machines are incapable of reading essay questions and the town clerk and her legion of helpers would be hard-pressed to get the results out in a timely fashion if they had to read essays, so, realistically, we are limited to yes/no or multiple-choice.

My proposal, for future "Non-Binding Public Opinion Advisory Question(s) Pursuant to MGL chapter 53 section 18A" that are foisted on Nantucket's voters is that a format for answering be adopted which utilizes the best of both alternatives: a yes/no format expanded to include or two more options. One option would be "maybe" and the other, possibly, could be "maybe not." In that sense, the town fathers, who are relying on the question for guidance, would have a much better view of the spectrum of public opinion than that which can be garnered from a simple "yes-no" answer.

Let's consider Question 5. The framers of the question would have you believe, because it says so, that the question is whether town-owned land should be allowed to be used to help shore up the beach on the eastern end of the island. Putting aside the fact that if the beach nourishment project doesn't go forward, it is very possible that in short order there will be no town-owned land in the proposed path of beach replenishment, the question is disingenuous. That's not what it is all about. It is all about the 'Sconset beach nourishment project as a concept. People's opinions cover the spectrum, but no one has been heard to say – at least in my earshot – that they oppose beach nourishment (or are in favor of it) because town-owned land is involved.

Some people are absolutists and are content with answering "yes" or "no." Whichever side of the question they are on, they see no chance for redemption in equivocation. Others believe that the project might be acceptable if certain conditions are met. They are uncomfortable voting "yes" or "no," but what other choice do they have?

How many such folks are there who are on the fence, who could go either way, depending



By DANIEL W. DRAKE
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

on the outcome of environmental impact reviews of the proposed dig site or studies of erosion impact away from the project? Would they be in favor of using town-owned land for the project if the sand was trucked in instead of being piped from the nearby ocean bottom? The way the question is framed, we will never know about the fence sitters.

Question 6 about a downtown parking structure perhaps doesn't lend itself to such a

range of opinions as beach nourishment engenders, but there are still options, while the answer sought is black or white. Opponents of the garage concept don't seem much disturbed about the idea of using the electric company land for parking. They just want all the parking at ground level. How is that conveyed through the choice of answers presented?

"Maybe" as an alternative to "yes" or "no" carries its own ambiguities. There are certainly many instances where a "maybe" option would be unfortunate if, indeed not the same as voting "no," just being more genteel about it. In a situation that requires action, a "maybe" choice might well be the death knell for the issue.

A "maybe" choice on votes at town meeting would result in nothing getting done, particularly in instances where passage requires a two-thirds majority. Even on the charter amendment questions on this year's ballot, a chance to vote "maybe" would not further the cause. Are we going to vote "maybe" on whether to change the title of the Assistant Town Administrator to Assistant Town Manager based on the incumbent's minute-taking ability? One hopes not.

Advisory questions are different, however. They are almost inevitably cited as gospel, at least by those satisfied with the outcome. At the very least, they take on a life of their own for a while after the vote, coloring the formulation of public policy, despite not necessarily reflecting the real public sentiment, particularly when they are as cleverly worded as this year's Question 5.

If the voter still needs to be persuaded on an issue or feels that with certain new information, his mind could be changed, that needs to come out in the polling of public opinion.

Is it too late for this year? Certainly the questions are on the ballot for this year in yes/no form. If you and I are still equivocal – that is if we need something more than "yes" or "no" – are we disenfranchised? Perhaps not.

You could leave your ballot blank on such a question. Many do that, but how do we know, if the answer is blank, whether the voter is on the fence on the question, or just doesn't care?

Another means of expressing concern about one or more of the issues in the ballot questions might be to cast your "maybe" vote next Tuesday on Questions 4, 5 and/or 6 by marking both "yes" and "no." That way your ballot would have to be hand counted and we could know exactly how many were in the middle of the spectrum. (If you do this, please don't tell anyone where you got the idea!)

And next time we poll voter opinion, they should be given a chance to express their real feelings by giving them at least a third option besides yes or no.

Politicians beware. The "Maybes" have it! ■

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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