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On Martha's Vineyard, a battle between old money and a casino

By Tom Rowley August 11


MARTHA'S VINEYARD, Mass. — Summertime, and the living is pricey. Small hotels are charging 500 bucks a night — without breakfast — and tourists renting a car for a week will not get much change from \$1,500.

Not that this troubles many visitors here, plenty of whom spend their days searching not for parking spaces but for yacht moorings.

That search has gotten tougher still, now that POTUS is in town. August is always busy, even without the retinue of aides and security staff that President Obama brought with him when he choppered in Friday night for his sixth presidential vacation on the island.

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Add to that a hefty gaggle of White House correspondents lining up for a spot in the presidential motorcade every day like sightseers on a particularly nerdy coach trip, and the place is heaving.

So these two weeks mark the zenith of the island's seasonal boom, when the population swells sixfold, according to figures kept by the Vineyard Gazette. It is also the point of greatest contrast between the tens of thousands of "summer people" and the far smaller, and often far poorer, population that lives here year-round.

That gulf has been brought into even sharper focus this year by a Native American tribe's proposal to build a casino here. The plan, which calls for bingo machines to be installed in the community center owned by the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head, could generate \$4.5 million a year for the tribe and, supporters say, help bridge the chasm between rich and poor.

Many of those who spend their summers here oppose the development, arguing that it would disturb the island's tranquility. The state and the town of Aquinnah, where about 300 Wampanoag members live, will argue in a federal court hearing Wednesday that the tribe has no right to build the casino.

David Schulte is among the summer residents who oppose the plan. For the investment banker, the appeal of the island lies in the absence of the sort of neon lights that tend to adorn a gambling parlor.

A gaudy temple to the pursuit of money would stand in marked contrast to the discretion that he believes defines the Vineyard, where visitors have long been reluctant to flaunt either their wealth or their celebrity status.

"The ethic here is: If you've got it, hide it," Schulte said, recalling how Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis used to walk around on her own on Martha's Vineyard and how Bill Clinton would join the line for ice cream.

Obama has maintained that low-key tradition. So far this year, he has remained largely within the secluded confines of his rental home, slipping out occasionally to dine with the first lady or play golf with comedian Larry David.

It was much the same two summers ago, when the Schultes rented their 7,000-square-foot residence to the first family.

Schulte was determined that his summer home, now on the market for \$22.5 million, would be in top condition for the president. "The king is coming, so you want the house to be perfect," he said.

But he stressed that only he was concerned about such impressions: The president made no demands.

Just a 10-minute drive from Schulte's house, though, some members of the Wampanoag tribe believe the days when summer visitors were relatively unobtrusive are long gone.

Kristina Hook, an elder, agrees that the island's super-rich vacationers used to blend into the background. But no more, she said. She singled out "nouveau riche" visitors who ignore stop signs or complain when the tribe forages for berries.

"Summer people — some are not," Hook said, a rueful quip that captures her mixed impressions.

Hook's home is much darker than Schulte's, without the benefit of his floor-to-ceiling windows. It is one-tenth the size, too, but she still cherishes the place, because the island house where she grew up had no electricity until the 1950s.

She left the Vineyard in her teens, when her father could no longer find work. She always dreamed of moving back but could never afford it.

Then, 15 years ago, Hook was offered one of the 30 or so units of wooden tribal housing in Aquinnah. Little of the development that took place on the island during the three decades she was gone seems to have benefited the tribe, she said.

She blames pollution from overpopulation for the dwindling haul of mussels and scallops when she wades into the island's ocean-fed "ponds," while the cost of living is so high that she imports toilet paper from the mainland. At 70, she still works a 40-hour week to support her husband, whose kidneys have failed.

When she does venture into the local store, she finds it troubling to hand over a "fistful of coupons" while others can "toss anything into the basket." "I take it a little on the personal side," she said.

This is why many members of the tribe believe a casino is the only way for their community to benefit from the summer influx. In court documents, the tribe's chairman, Tobias Vanderhoop, argues that the extra revenue is

“sorely needed” and will boost local employment.

“We as a tribe do not benefit from the tourism industry at all,” said Cheryl Andrews-Maltais, chairwoman of the tribe’s gambling corporation. “We hope to be another entertainment venue for folks to visit so we, too, can capitalize on the industry that keeps the island economy going.”

But some members of the tribe see things differently, siding — for once — with the summer people about whom they usually complain.

Hook is among them. For her, the development would be a “travesty,” just as detrimental to the tribe’s commitment to nature as the damage inflicted by outsiders. She argues that the tribe should instead set up landscaping or cleaning businesses to create a little income off the summer guests.

“I like to go to the casino,” Hook said. “Just not here.”

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