

The Barnstable Patriot

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TO THE EDITOR**

Barnstable, Please Don't Do This To Yourself!

My awareness about sewage disposal started when I was 12. My family lived in a very old house in rural Vermont with a septic tank that needed cleaning. We couldn't afford to hire a company, so we cleaned it ourselves. On Labor Day...

I discovered Cape Cod after college, spent numerous happy holidays on the Cape and love it there. Now I worry about you. If you really decide to let short-term rentals (STRs like Airbnb and Vrbo) proliferate, Barnstable's big wastewater treatment plan with the big price tag is already inadequate and underfunded.

You can take my advice to the bank because I live in Phoenix, Arizona now. In 2016, the state passed what's known as "the Airbnb Bill." It effectively abolished residential zoning and allows homes to become unstaffed motels.

The result of that law? A myriad of new stresses to our infrastructure and municipalities, much more effluent flushed down our drains than our neighborhoods produced before, and the loss of our peace and quiet.

Only a few examples:

Jerome, Arizona is a tiny town of 444 people outside of Sedona, advertised to tourists as a ghost town. Mandy Worth, a member of the Jerome town council, says the law converted a lot of housing to STRs, bringing in "corporate and large money people who are buying up houses, kicking people out." There's also been sewage backing up into bathtubs.

So far, 6% of Paradise Valley's housing units are STRs, but all it takes is one. A septic tank exploded. The rule-of-thumb is you get the tank pumped based on the home's occupancy, which STRs exceed all the time. Here in Phoenix, an investor from Alaska converted a 4-bedroom house to 9 bedrooms and advertises accommodations for 32 people.

And then there's me. The 4-bedroom across the street from my home was advertised on

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Airbnb.com as “Sleeps 19, Great Pool & Game Room.” I saw groups as large as 30, and beer pong in the driveway. (It’s a regular, long-term rental now, but who knows what’s next.)

Here’s the key question for Barnstable. How many houses like these can the standard 8-inch sewer main in a residential neighborhood handle?

As I understand it, you already intend to allow STRs to exceed legal occupancy limits. Even those will mean nothing to the owners, the property managers, or the renters and party hosts.

You should recalculate your wastewater plan assumptions, in total treatment capacity and pipe size, for what are currently your single-family neighborhoods. Hospitality businesses like motels and inns have very different drainage, sewage, and venting systems. If you’re really going to allow an unlimited number of homes in Barnstable to become STRs, and you don’t know which ones will go that way when, you’d be wise to outfit all of them with commercial-grade sewer connections.

You’ll also need to increase your police force’s size and budget. Obviously, I hope you don’t go down the road we did here. You have a choice that the state of Arizona didn’t give us. Please don’t do this to yourselves! Preserve the Cape we all love.

Susan Edwards
Phoenix, Arizona