

The Barnstable Patriot

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Short-term rental businesses: two years later, still picking up the pieces

by Amy Hunt

I'm the first-born daughter, overly confident and buoyant on stage. My little sister Heather Hunt, the ad hoc spokesperson for BarnstableWatch, prefers to sit in the back row and make detailed notes. But the moment called, and Heather met the moment.

She doesn't know I'm doing this, but it had to be done. Hold that thought, we'll come back to it.

Our local newspapers have called short-term rental businesses in residential neighborhoods a "long-simmering controversy" and a "saga." It didn't begin generations ago, when Cape Cod families rented their homes to others from time to time, especially in the summer season. It didn't even begin in 2008, when Brian Chesky started Airbnb to help people make extra money by sharing extra rooms in their homes.

The saga began two years ago.

In 2018, the Town of Barnstable began deliberating short-term rentals. In 2019, Realtors, major landlords, and other commercial interests were formally invited to Town Hall to share their views a good six months before citizens.

Around the same time, Scudder Bay Investment Corp. purchased two homes in residential-only neighborhoods and advertised them on Airbnb and Vrbo. One home was in Centerville. The other, in Osterville.

Before long, the neighbors – my sister Heather was one of them – had lost the "quiet enjoyment of home," a legal covenant between all of us and our local government.

New groups of strangers came and went every few days. Oh, the stories she told us! Transport vans, fires on the wooden deck near the propane grill, needles her dog nearly stepped on, frat party weekends, bachelorette weekends (one with X-rated balloons floating around outside). Yes, I've seen the photographs.

But to be clear: this isn't about poorly behaved tourists and nuisances. Polite people also bought access to the lockbox. Scudder Bay Investment Corp. was running a business – suddenly a Motel 6, right next door.

Finally, Heather asked the Town: is this changed use of a residence really allowed? The Town wouldn't answer. When she paid to put the question to the Zoning Board of Appeals, it said it couldn't decide if Town Hall didn't decide.

Now, let's fast forward a bit.

Heather found the nice retired couple who lived next to Scudder Bay's second business in Centerville. They had lived here for decades, raised kids. Their lives were not the same at home anymore, either. Heather pored over Vrbo ads for Barnstable, crossed checked Assessor records, and found more residents who didn't know what to do. Eventually, BarnstableWatch was born.

Last year, NBC10 came to both Scudder Bay's properties. The Director of Scudder Bay told the reporter the neighbors "exaggerated" problems. He said of his revolving-door renters: "I can't control what these people do when they're here." In Osterville, he took the TV crew up to illegally constructed attic bedrooms without safe fire egress and said he "probably shouldn't" rent them. (The Town took six months to issue a Cease and Desist on these rooms, which it never enforced.)

The fact is, Scudder Bay Investment Corp. and the Town of Barnstable's lack of responsiveness to residents formed a toxic stew.

Now, let's fast-forward to 2020.

Scudder Bay has sold its two short-term rental businesses. The home in Centerville is a real residence again, with real neighbors. The home in Osterville is being used as a home again, in the form of a stable long-term rental. And peace is restored across the land.

Only it's not. Because the quiet enjoyment of *your* home could hit the skids anytime.

To wit, there's a short-term rental business next door to me now. This weekend it was a bachelorette bonanza but without the giant body part balloons outside, thank heavens (the house is outside my young daughter's bedroom window). Small world: Airbnb says its "co-hosted" by the Planning Board Chairman's family member.

The Town Council's Zoning subcommittee, and the Planning Board have all recommended that every village, every street, roll out the welcome mat to these Airbnb and Vrbo businesses. (Well, the Planning Board needs to do it all over, which is a story for another day.) The proposal is on its way to a final Town Council vote. Should it pass, it would be legal for the home next to you to be used as a Scudder Bay business.

And here we are, back to where I promised.

My sister Heather Hunt, who's happiest in the back of the room taking notes, has been pretty squeaky on behalf of BarnstableWatch's many residents. Because of that, she's been subject to *ad hominem*: a fancy term for getting personal, from basic name-calling to assaults on motives and means. (People resort to this when they don't feel facts are on their side.)

A few elected officials have demeaned her in their communications, from what she believes to what she wears. Seriously.

Heather has even been labeled an “elitist.” This particular elitist grew up in a working-class town, works full time, doesn’t vacation like the rest of us, and enjoys shopping at Marshalls where you won’t ever find me. She didn’t so much choose Osterville as Osterville chose her: it’s where our 88-year-old mom finally retired, and it’s a good idea to stay close.

This elitist spends her free time, such as it is, volunteering with the non-profit that administers the nation’s organ transplant network. (A few years ago, she stretched out on an operating table so surgeons could cut out 60 percent of her liver and give it to Hunt sister number three. Heather’s lack of interest in the spotlight isn’t a lack of courage.)

The Chair of Barnstable’s Planning Board used the Town microphone to rip Heather in his recusal speech – only her, alone – the day she joined 15 other citizens to ask for a board vote free of conflicts and family financial interests. He told the public, falsely of course, that Heather is a paid operative. She told me she’s still waiting to see a check in the mail but took it as a compliment.

Another Planning Board member announced an intention to vote not on the merits of the zoning change, or with the entire town in mind, but based on personal animosity: “I could never ever stop this amendment from happening based on the fact that I would be letting people know they can behave this way.”

This wasn’t the first time a public official used a taxpayer-funded microphone to vilify citizens. I watched one meeting on Channel 18 where a resident who asked to see public records had words like “repulsive,” “fearmongering,” and “conspiracy theorist” attached to his name by a public official, and at a meeting he didn’t even attend.

The personal attacks are noticed out there. People have called me to say they’re worried about speaking up after what they’ve watched officials say about my sister and others on Channel 18. They’ve actually asked what retaliation might be possible. In response, I always point out those elected officials who are respectful and openly encouraging of citizen engagement. These leaders really matter.

While all of us struggle in this quicksand, Scudder Bay Investment Corp. is long gone. Of course, new Scudder Bays have shown up, and our Zoning Subcommittee has recommended we invite more of them in and allow them next to you.

And hey, to the next person who will only be soothed by hurling *ad hominem*: please remember my name. I’m the showy big sister. I’d be delighted.

Or we could just talk zoning.

Amy Hunt has split her time between Osterville and Boston for many years.