

The Barnstable Patriot

**AUGUST 14, 2020
TO THE EDITOR**

Don't have a short-term rental next door? Just you wait.

If some Barnstable officials succeed in changing all our residential zoning with an August 20 Town Council vote, I'm willing to make a bet: you'll have Airbnb or Vrbo "neighbors" in about a year.

Here's why the math is on my side.

In 2016, the same laissez-faire short-term rental policy was enacted in Phoenix, Scottsdale, Tempe, Paradise Valley, and other beautiful Arizona communities. There were no residential zone protections, no residency needed for owners, no limits on the number of homes that could be run as hotels – exactly like the zoning change the Town wants here.

Four years later, Maricopa County has 12,329 short-term rentals, There are neighborhoods and streets lost to real estate investors, most who live out-of-state. With the same policy in place here, the same thing will happen.

I know about this because I do research and have learned way too much. The house next to me is an investor-owned short-term rental, a revolving door of strangers on holiday.

I wrote to and spoke with my Town Councilor, who I believe supports this zoning change and whose vote I hoped to inform with my daily experience. I'm not going to say who it is or which precinct I live in. My point is not to call anyone out or embarrass them. Also, it doesn't matter. What matters are the facts about the zoning change, what it exposes all of our homes to, and how little our representatives seem to understand.

I asked my Councilor if my situation next door became unbearable, is there any neighborhood I could move to in Barnstable where this couldn't happen all over again? The answer was no. Is it possible that I could be the only real resident who lives on my street? Yes, that could happen too.

My Councilor defended the laissez-faire short-term rental policy by saying nobody can control what others do with their property. I was aghast. That's exactly what zoning is!

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Zoning allows local governments to regulate how properties are used. Examples of zoning classifications include residential, agricultural, commercial, industrial, or hotel/hospitality. I can't operate a hair salon out of my living room or a chicken farm in my backyard. Why can the absentee owner next door operate a hotel?

My Councilor filibustered most questions, talking about the process of "crafting" policy, as though none of this is real yet. But the Town's proposal was approved by the Council's Zoning and Regulatory committee, the Planning Board, and is scheduled for a final Town Council vote on August 20. It's real and our representatives are responsible for it.

My Councilor also wanted to focus the ordinance and all the fun ways I can complain and call the police. Here's free advice: nobody gets excited about needing an ongoing relationship with police.

I am one of those people who spent everything on a nice home in a cul de sac where someday I will retire. My Town Councilor is probably going to vote to wipe my residential zone out. I'll have to sell and leave Barnstable, and the math says a Vrbo investor will outbid a regular would-be resident for my house. And the family on the other side of me, with that cute kid on that red scooter, will maybe write a letter a lot like this.

But it won't matter.

Michelle Lombard
Town of Barnstable