

The Barnstable Patriot

Letter from Osterville: Barnstable has left us

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The Osterville Village Association meets monthly on the first Tuesday at the Village Library at 7 pm

The truth is, the Town of Barnstable has left us. Town Hall has been threatening conventional, residential zoning in our villages for a few years now. As it persists, a surprising number of people have asked me what I think about going our separate ways. If my village of Osterville ever seceded from Barnstable, it would be a small town, but not ridiculously so. There would be 81 smaller towns in Massachusetts.

Abraham Lincoln prosecuted the Civil War to keep Confederate states in the Union and end human slavery – but he also called secession a “sacred right.” Commenting on the war with Mexico in 1848, Lincoln said people “have the right to rise up, and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better.” Even very small groups of residents “may revolutionize and make their own, of so much of the territory as they inhabit.” In 1864, a year before the end of the Civil War, the tiny town of Gosnold cut ties with Chilmark, Martha’s Vineyard. Its first town meeting had twelve voters.

To say self-determination is a major principle in America is an understatement. In our Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote that self-determination existed before the formation of any government anywhere. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men. . . .are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights.... That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government.”

The question is, does Barnstable’s government allow our self-determination? Or is it destructive to those ends? Are issues discussed and resolved in an open, clear way? Do we have fair – and most importantly, effective – opportunities to participate in public decision-making?

In Federalist #10, James Madison warned not of a domineering federal government but small-town “cabals...who first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests, of the people.”

Here are some facts about how Barnstable’s government approaches planning, zoning, and development. They can’t be disputed. As the kids say these days, I have the receipts.

- Barnstable Planning staff often develops policies and draft ordinances by inviting business interests to offer views in advance. Too often, that work happens in places other than where the Town Code designates it will. Too often, it’s done without public notice. Later, residents are allocated three minutes of one-way public comment in public meetings.

- This approach was used for short-term rentals and the new “form-based” zoning; the Planning Department works with business interests and residents are forced to react – later. On Accessory Dwelling Units, the Zoning Subcommittee talked for many months about a draft ordinance presented by a commercial group, while its website showed no meetings, no agendas, no minutes. Consequently, only one developer participated before the day of the Subcommittee vote.
- For years, business interests have had extraordinary inside access and influence both informally and through a largely self-selecting ad hoc Economic Development Task Force. When 300+ residents petitioned for a similar task force to level the playing field, the Council rejected the idea as having “no merit.”
- Public comment is often ignored, even when widely supported and presented through groups of citizens, united; one Town Councilor famously crowed about “not giving an inch” to Civic Associations.
- Town Planning staff has called single-family residential zoning “a burden on the community,” and advanced a draft ordinance that would have the effect of eliminating it, without being clear about that in public communications.
- The Town hands out Rental Registration permission through a form, and then tells property owners on that form to pay a lawyer to decide if Barnstable really allows it where they live.
- The new “form-based” zoning proposal is all about density and moves away from traditional use-based zoning. The Planning Department website characterizes it as exclusively about downtown Hyannis. But in 2019, at a meeting with no public attendees, Planning staff said it has “always been the goal” to “move it” to other villages.
- Our housing crisis is only discussed when the issue is building and adding density. When the issue is about protecting the current housing stock for locals (for example, by limiting short-term rental businesses), the housing crisis is irrelevant.

- For the upcoming 2021 Barnstable Local Comprehensive Plan, the Planning Department says it wants to abandon Village Plans and run a top-down process. It seems to already have a plan for you, which Village Plans could disrupt.

As I understand it, Osterville village contributes approximately half of Barnstable's tax base. Yet our voice on the Town Council is one of 13, or about 8%. It does make one think. Of course, secession is arduous and requires process, including at the Massachusetts Legislature. But people are now talking about options, and my village isn't alone. Our most recent meeting was attended by a number of residents outside of Osterville, which is rare.

The Town's concerning direction is reason enough for us all to consider new ideas. The fact is, every village here – Barnstable, Centerville, Cotuit, Hyannis, Marstons Mills, Osterville, and West Barnstable – could secede, and none would make the list of the smallest towns in America. Who knows, perhaps we'd join forces and support one another in new ways. In short, we'd all be fine. And undoubtedly, much better served.

Frederick Wrightson, Osterville