

BarnstableWatch.com **ALERT**

Flawed Online Opinion Survey on Short-Term Rentals

The Town of Barnstable is creating new zoning rules for short-term rentals in all our residential neighborhoods and seeks public feedback in the form of an on-line survey available through November 1, 2019.

The following identifies serious flaws in the survey and encourages homeowners, Village Associations, and others who care about quality of life and character of our neighborhoods to communicate concerns directly to the Town at Council at council@town.barnstable.ma.us.

The flaws, in short

1. **The Town declined to include the *one key issue identified by residents*:** investors converting homes to transient lodging.
2. **Resident views will be swamped by those of business interests:** for example, the Cape Cod & Islands Association of Realtors posted and “Facebook”-ed the survey and weneedavacation.com distributed it to those with a financial interest in its outcome.
3. The survey relies on self-reported zip codes, and can be submitted with no zip code at all, and **allows anyone anywhere, to take it.**

The details

1. Without explanation, the Town decided not to include the *one key question Barnstable residents identified as the key issue*:

Should real estate operating companies and other investors be able to buy homes in residential areas and change their use from single-family dwellings to transient lodging?

The Town conducted a residential focus group to get feedback on new short-term rental regulations in July 2018. We urged the Town’s consultant to hear from residents because “stakeholders” to whom Town Hall directed its consultant for early input were business interests: realtors, landlords, attorneys who work with them. (Town records confirm that focus.)

The residential focus group’s answer to the question above was an overwhelming “No.” Participants said investor-owned transient rentals was a very different use than Cape families renting their homes from time to time, as is our tradition.

The Town also struck a “Comment” box from its draft survey where citizens could have stated views on this or other issues. Residents who do not believe commercial real estate companies should use homes as transient lodging should tell the Town: council@town.barnstable.ma.us.

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2. The survey doesn't distinguish between Barnstable homeowner responses and responses from those in and outside of Barnstable with economic interest in the outcome.

For example, and no doubt among others, the Cape Cod & Islands Association of Realtors posted and "Facebook"-ed the invitation to its members to give "public" input to the survey and weneedavacation.com, a Cape and Islands short-term rental enterprise, emailed the survey to those with financial interests in its outcome.

It will be no surprise that the short-term rental industry will respond in full force to protect its business and that real estate agents will generally reflect their national trade association's published "advocacy tips" to oppose short-term rental regulations in order to "protect property rights." The Town's interest in the real estate and short-term rental industries' views is reasonable; structuring one anonymous "public" survey in a way that allows business perspectives to swamp resident perspectives is not.

3. Valid polls and surveys are designed scientifically, to provide genuinely representative community views. This one is not.

- "Open access" surveys allow anyone to participate. They don't produce reliable data.
- Survey respondents don't need a confirmed Barnstable zip code or any zip code to submit.
- The rule for the Town's open access survey is "one survey per device." According to Pew Research, the average American household has five internet-connected devices (smartphone, desktop/laptop computer, tablet, streaming media device). We know of people submitting multiple surveys.
- Airbnb (and others) spend significantly, and under the radar, to influence local decisions. For example, Airbnb is currently spending \$3 million in Jersey City to influence new regulations. Airbnb has begun emailing homeowners in Barnstable villages encouraging them to rent their homes. There is no reason to believe Airbnb is not working on influencing outcomes here.

We encourage homeowners, Village Associations and others concerned about investors turning homes into transient lodging to express that concern to the Town at council@town.barnstable.ma.us. We encourage the Town not to base decisions about the use of homes in our residential neighborhoods on a flawed and unreliable survey.

Coastal and tourist-dependent communities across the country have already acted to protect residential neighborhoods from investors using homes as pay-per-night hotels. It's time for Barnstable to do the same. Learn more at www.barnstablewatch.com.

Contact: Heather Hunt, Kathleen Holcombe et al., Town of Barnstable's residential focus group participants and members of BarnstableWatch at barnstablewatch@gmail.com