

The Barnstable Patriot

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Saved by the bell: Council tables short-term rental regulations

In the nick of time, the Town Council was stopped Nov. 5 by a tie vote from going ahead with an alarming proposal to allow short-term rentals – with stays as short as three days – in all the residential zones of Barnstable’s seven villages.

The change is opposed by four village civic associations and Barnstable Watch, a citizen’s group, but the town, in its zeal to bring more business and tax dollars to Barnstable, often doesn’t listen to its citizens. The Planning Board and the Cape Cod Commission have already approved the new short-term rental regulations, along with realtors, lawyers, developers, restaurant owners, bankers, and the usual power brokers.

Despite zoom meetings and attempts at wider discussion, the average resident was probably unaware of the crucial vote two weeks ago.

Not enough people read local papers or bother to go to the Town of Barnstable website to read the details of the proposed short-term rental regulations, which could have a long-term negative impact on Cape Cod.

Yes, state and local governments are in dire financial straits due to the pandemic, but money will come from Washington. And, the Cape’s economy has recently changed, with more homes being purchased than ever before as city-dwellers try to escape COVID-19, a change that will lead to more taxes for the town, without increasing short-term rentals.

The proposal the council set temporarily aside (some members want it to resurface in a few months) would have raised the number of short-term rentals from the current 770 to a cap of 1,500 throughout the seven villages.

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Opening the floodgates on short-term rentals in every zone shouldn't be allowed until residents are somehow fully educated on the ramifications.

Are they ready for hundreds more cars to come over the bridges every three days and pour down Route 6, with the resulting pollution, CO-2 emissions and a constant noise level more like the highways around Boston?

Are residents really ready for the house next door to turn into a party destination for weddings and birthdays, and for cars to be parked on side lawns and backyards?

Do voters know that many cities and towns (Providence, Boston, Jersey City), are banning Airbnb's because, in addition to daily annoyances, the new businesses are reducing the number of homes available for rental or sale to middleclass, year-round residents?

An Oct. 28 headline in a New York Times article on the \$31 billion Airbnb business read: "Noise. Damage. Safety Problems. Airbnb is racing to address the risks posed by raucous guests before it goes public."

The article said noisy and drunken parties, more frequent now that bars have closed and hotels are riskier, are frequent citizen complaints.

The Times pointed to another culprit – the "Instant Book" option, which "confirms bookings without getting the approval of the host," a feature that makes Airbnb more competitive with hotels. Complaints about party houses, the Times reported "soared 250% between July and September, compared to last year." In August, the article said, Airbnb placed a 16-person cap on reservations and started testing technology to block last-minute listings.

The median price in September for a single-family on the Cape was \$550,000. To recoup high purchase prices, new owners may count on the town to allow them in the future to turn second homes into short-term rentals.

This will further reduce homes available to people of moderate income, a trend evident in other countries.

A Sept. 22 article in The New York Times noted that, according to Inside Airbnb, a site that tracks listings around the globe, short-term rentals in Dublin, Ireland rose from 1,700 full home listings in 2016 to 4,500 this year just before the coronavirus crisis.

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The story said the trend has reversed during the COVID epidemic, and “the number of long-term rentals in the city increased by 1,000 homes, a 50% increase from the year before.” The story reported that young people are very happy to once again find reasonable long-term rentals.

With COVID and so many new second homeowners, more business for Barnstable will come naturally, without make-shift hotels in all our residential neighborhoods. All that is needed is patience until the pandemic is under control and a willingness of the Planning Board and Town Council to shift the emphasis to longer-term planning.

Municipal department heads and Cape Cod Commission staff need to come up with plans to increase the number of electric vehicles and to introduce a railroad that goes all the way down the Cape to bring workers to and from jobs and to transport Cape Codders who need to find employment in Boston.

The planning shouldn't count on more construction for the upper middle-class -- high-priced apartments or McMansions capable of becoming Airbnb's -- but on building a more diverse and responsible year-round economy that doesn't increase CO-2 emissions and strain the single-source aquifer.

The emphasis should be on encouraging the arts, the blue economy, organic farming, a new and exciting local architecture that would feature smaller homes, higher density townhouses and duplexes, and second-floor apartments over shops and cafes in village centers.

But preserve the surrounding residential zoning.

To increase moderate income housing, use what's here-- including renovating deteriorating homes and re-purposing old schools and nursing homes -- and avoid building humongous and expensive apartments, such as Everleigh, which looms over Barnstable's border.

Have a vision, one that doesn't just accept three more large, expensive apartments and a box store because a power broker like Cape Cod Healthcare wants to build them on Attucks Lane instead of more medical outpatient offices as the hospital promised 10 years ago. Half of the 40 acres the now financially strapped hospital owns there could still be kept for medical offices, and the rest used for a colorful complex of duplex apartments for low- and moderate-income families, using state and local funds.

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There's a need to push back on the usual power-brokers and developers and to end the kind of catch-as-catch can planning that has allowed two drug stores on the rotary, a Tractor Supply store on Bears's Way despite strong opposition from citizens with homes nearby, and, now, a Dollar General store on West Main Street on a site that could have been used for moderate income housing. It would be interesting to learn how many of these developments will get big tax breaks for building in, or next to, so-called Opportunity Zones, census tracts with large numbers of low-income people. This is not good planning for the future of Cape Cod, which will depend on homes for workers to live or rent here.

Stick to traditional rentals

Heather Hunt, the spokesperson for Barnstable Watch, recently stressed, "We support traditional Cape rentals ... Families have rented their homes for years during the summer, but what is happening now is very different and puts neighborhoods and villages at risk." John Crow, president of the Osterville Village Association, remarked that even when guests are well-behaved, "it is fundamentally off-putting to have new people 365 days a year."

The four village associations opposed to the Town's plan have offered amendments that would: strike the town's proposal to change zoning in districts where the only permitted use is a single-family residential dwelling; ban all investor-owned short-term rentals; require owner occupancy for 3 months a year; require minimum stays of one week, unless the owner lives on the premises; drop the number of allowable rental registrations from 2 to 1 per property owner; cap the number of times one can rent at 8 weeks per calendar year; give current short-term rental owners in residential districts 2 years to phase them out; and ban use of side and back lawns for parking.

If the town council insists on reviving its regulations, approval should be the subject of a referendum on the ballot. The town could send a leaflet explaining its plans and the amendments proposed by the objecting village associations and mail it to every resident of Barnstable before they vote on the ballot question. Major zoning changes should not be left to six Planning Board members and the 13-member council. The question is far too important.