



CAPE COD TIMES

Opinion

Short-term rental regs need civic associations' input

By John Crow

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It's hard to trust a process you can't really see.

The town of Barnstable sought input from the local civic associations on new short-term rental regulations approximately six months after soliciting input from commercial interests. That was curious and disappointing. However, we appreciated what appeared to be an interest in our views.

We were surprised, to put it mildly, that the next step in the process following the Hyannis Civic Association meeting on Jan. 7 was not discussion of our feedback. Rather, the Ad Hoc Committee to Review Zoning and Permitting Regulations (“zoning subcommittee”) met two days later and directed staff to draft a regulatory approach developed outside of public meetings and devoid of the civic associations' feedback.

When we learned town staff had recommended changing zoning across Barnstable to allow short-term rentals in all residential neighborhoods, we pointed out that this is in opposition to the sentiment of several civic associations that strongly opposed such short-term rentals – specifically, investor-operated, 365-day-a-year makeshift hotels in our residential neighborhoods.

It is not lost on us that the recommendation to address short-term rentals solely through nuisance regulation comports with the precise approach advocated by lobbyists representing commercial interests.

At the Jan. 9 Barnstable Town Council meeting, a member of the council entreated all concerned parties to “have faith in the process.” Yet the zoning regulations that the zoning subcommittee directed to be drafted were devised outside of a transparent process necessary for that faith. The

zoning subcommittee's public discussion of civic associations' concerns, preferences and feedback it purportedly sought – and an explanation of the ways in which our feedback will inform draft regulations – would certainly help.

Residents of the town of Barnstable have repeatedly expressed frustration with processes that sidestep residents and lack transparency (the most recent example being a backstop investment of taxpayer funds in 310 Main St., Centerville).

Many of us have lived elsewhere and have experienced inclusive, transparent and responsive town government processes. The civic associations asked the town of Barnstable to pause and move the short-term rental regulation development process forward in that way.

First, we'd like to understand how our views will shape draft regulations, and if not, why the Town Council believes they should not.

Second, the zoning subcommittee indicated that it would consult with civic associations again after hearing our initial feedback. The zoning subcommittee should adhere to that and build a second consultation into its final regulation development schedule.

Finally, the Jan. 9 zoning subcommittee meeting included quick and frankly confusing discussion about a fast-tracked schedule toward the adoption of final regulations in March. (To the best of our knowledge, no schedule has otherwise been announced to the public.) The Town Council should delay decisions about what draft regulations should look like and even setting a schedule until after the zoning subcommittee and the Town Council have heard and discussed our views.

We would like to have faith in the process. We hope the town has faith in transparency and responsiveness.

John Crow is president of the Osterville Civic Association. This piece was co-written with Deborah Krau and David Sauro, presidents of the Greater Hyannis and Centerville civic associations, respectively.