

The Barnstable Patriot

February 11, 2021 | My View | John Crow | Guest columnist

The author is the president of the Osterville Village Association

Give it to us straight

First, I would like to wish our new Town Council President, Matthew Levesque, the best in his new position. His is the particularly impactful role in our community, together with, and supported by, our Town Manager. Many pressing issues confront this Council, and it recently added a new one: improving communication with citizens. This is welcomed and appreciated. Here's a thought on that.

In December, the Zoning Subcommittee recommended its second major townwide, residential zoning change in less than six months. This newly proposed ordinance addresses Accessory Dwelling Units, or ADUs. Its intent is to increase housing for residents.

The words on the paper the Subcommittee voted out, however, lead to something very different. The words allow non-resident real estate investors to buy our single-family homes, not to live in them, but to build ADUs on those lots by right, and then rent both the home and the ADU. The words require only one of them to be rented as long-term, year-round housing. The words are silent on the use of the second home on the lot. That means nonresident, real estate investors can use one of those housing units as a short-term rental. The words raise the same contentious issues we talked about last year: inviting investors to buy up our housing stock, wholesale, and to create much more profitable short-term rental units. The result – less year-round housing.

This is completely different from how most other Cape towns have written their ADU ordinances: residents attest that the home is owner-occupied and that the ADU is used as long-term housing. In recommending this different use of ADUs here in Barnstable – and letting real estate investors buy homes and build ADUs that could become Airbnbs – the Zoning Subcommittee voted without any effective public outreach and, predictably, de minimis public input.

Later, when residents expressed dismay due to the lack of communication about a zoning proposal, the town began to call the recommended zoning ordinance an “initial policy discussion.” The Planning Board told the public that last week’s meeting was “the first conversation” about the zoning proposal, that it “hadn’t gotten off the ground yet.”

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My simple request of Town leadership is the following: as the Town works on communications, how about starting with straight talk? An ADU ordinance to increase housing doesn't invite non-resident investors to buy homes, not live in them, build an ADU and use it as short-term rental. That doesn't increase housing. Short-term rentals are known to drive housing prices even higher.

Let's call things what they are. A Town Council Subcommittee can't vote out a zoning ordinance and then, after the fact, say it was just an "initial policy discussion." Can we call things what they truly are, please?

One last point. The Planning Board member who recused himself from the short-term rental zoning change, due to familial financial interests, was subsequently invited to participate in the Zoning Subcommittee deliberations on ADUs, which now says let's let real estate investors short-term rent one of the homes. I'm not suggesting that was his idea; I am simply saying it's not a good idea.

What are we doing here? If the Town's objective is public confidence in government, it needs to start in a more basic place than simply increasing "communications." First, let's call things what they are by placing a premium on straight talk. Finally, let's focus on what the Town does, making certain it actually lines up with what the Town says.

There remains a call for a Citizen Task Force on Residential Zoning. This sounds like a great way to start a new chapter on residential zoning with actual citizen engagement, and what those citizens want Barnstable to look and feel like going forward.