

April 13, 2023

Dear Planning and Zoning Commission members,

I appreciate the commission's efforts to regulate short-term rentals ~~with this proposed ordinance~~ ^{with this amendment}, but think it would be a mistake to eliminate a key requirement that any STR property must be an owner's primary residence. Without this provision, there's nothing to stop out-of-town investors from buying homes and, in essence, converting them to motels, as has been the case in many other parts of the country.

When this happens, residential neighborhoods become more like commercial zones, with a constant churn of new people moving in and out every day. These temporary occupants don't care about supporting our school system, libraries, police, fire department or other public services, as do many fulltime residents. They do not vote, belong to civic organizations, participate in community activities, attend school sports games, or simply stop to pick up litter, the way so many of us fulltime residents do.

What's more, when investors convert homes to STRs, they drive up housing prices, often putting home ownership out of the reach of most families.

A sense of shared neighborhood responsibility is particularly important near Long Pond and Bush Pond, where my wife, Lisa and I have lived for more than 40 years. The Lantern Hill Valley Association (LHVA), an all-volunteer organization, owns and is legally required to maintain two of the three dams that contain these ponds. The McKee Farm Trust, a family group, owns the other dam. Long Pond, where a state boat launch is open to the public, has long been a popular kayaking, canoeing and fishing destination; the Town of Ledyard is preparing to develop a new public park on Bush Pond.

Since its formation half a century ago, LHVA members and their supporters have spent thousands of dollars, and devoted countless hours of labor, to make sure these dams are safe, and the ponds remain available for public boating. The McKee Farm Trust has often worked in tandem with the LHVA.

The LHVA also has raised money to commission a study of invasive water plants. Its members volunteer to monitor water quality and are working with the Save the Sound organization on plans to install a fishway to allow migratory fish to return to Long Pond.

These are some activities that flourish in active neighborhoods, but unlikely to occur in hotel zones.

The proposed ~~ordinance~~ ^{regulation amendment} does include several reasonable rules to control out-of-control parties, such as the raucous gathering late last month in Mystic that resulted in Stonington police having to call on support from Ledyard, Groton, Westerly and State Police departments. These well-thought-out provisions – limiting the number of guests, and prohibiting weddings, receptions, banquets, and corporate retreats – might help prevent similar incidents here, but they wouldn't prevent the overall character of neighborhoods from deteriorating.

Juliet Hodge, Ledyard's Director of Land Use and Planning, told me this week that the decision to eliminate this requirement stems from concerns about a federal court ruling in New Orleans. Last year, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals decided that the Louisiana city's STR residency requirement was unconstitutional, because it "discriminated against interstate commerce."

The New Orleans City Council has responded by placing a temporary moratorium on new commercial short-term rental permits in certain historic, mixed-use zones while officials continue to study the matter.

Planning Director Hodge told me that perhaps Ledyard's proposed ordinance could be amended to limit the number of STRs an investor can own, or other options. Mayor Allyn told me a simpler solution might be to ban STRs outright.

I urge the commission to study how Ledyard might retain the residency requirement without facing litigation. Perhaps the town can determine how other municipalities are responding to the New Orleans court ruling, before voting on an ~~ordinance~~ ^{amendment} that affects the quality of life for so many fulltime residents. Thank you for your consideration. ^{the amendment}

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