

February 12, 2023

Dear West Tisbury Planning Board,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the first project to come before you for review under the new Residential Building Size Bylaw.

When our Preserve West Tisbury subcommittee set out to explore the idea of crafting a house size bylaw there were two major concerns that drove the conversation. The first of those was the need to address houses that were well beyond any historic or current norms for house sizes, that were out of scale for their neighborhoods and the environment, and that required an outsized use of resources. The second concern was the intensity to which projects were building up, and modifying their lots, with more intensive impacts to habitat and the character of the entire neighborhood.

Unfortunately, this project raises many concerns and illustrates exactly why we felt the town needed this new zoning bylaw amendment.

If we look at this project in reference to the review criteria defined in the bylaw we see many points of conflict outlined below.

F.1.a. This project does not mitigate impacts on existing rural and scenic character. Because of the nature of the shape of the lot and wetland locations, buildings are massed in a congested area, in full visibility of Indian Hill Rd and nearby neighbors. Indian Hill Rd. is arguably one of West Tisbury's most iconic, rural, agricultural roads and is representative of a character that the town values and has worked hard to maintain.

F.1.b. Natural buffers have not been maintained, and the barn contemplated under this review would be incredibly impactful to the uphill neighbor and will add to the already significant impacts of the building density and visibility from Indian Hill Rd.

F.1.c. The barn structure shows many windows and sliding glass doors, which will certainly have lighting impacts, and are atypical for an agricultural space.

F.2. We have not seen a preliminary landscape plan, but it appears that natural features have already been greatly altered. It is hard to imagine the scope of mitigation it would take to restore the natural landscape.

F.3. The project has already made alterations to the natural landscape and the impacts to habitat are stunning. It appears as though grades have been changed, topsoil and original vegetation removed throughout much of the site. Nearly every bit of the front portion of the lot is covered in either building, hardener or stone. We were not able to visit it, but the back section appeared to have significant clearing and modification.

F.5. As mentioned above, the alteration of the landform is one of the things that really stands out when visiting the site. The hillside has been deeply cut into in places and appeared to have stone retaining in progress. In other areas the hillside remained, but appeared to have been regraded, was stripped of all vegetation and showed signs of erosion.

Related to this particular criteria we wanted to point out that one of the pieces of the bylaw that we spent countless hours and meetings devoted to was how to include or exclude the square footage in basements. Most houses have basements, whether used to house mechanicals and storage or adapted into exercise, entertainment or other living spaces. With current insulation standards basements are typically insulated to keep the entire structure inside the thermal envelope, making it even easier to convert them into usable space. We did not want to penalize an applicant who was making use of space that was already there. By the same token we did not want applicants getting the bonus square footage that did not count towards their Total Floor Area by carving into hillsides and regrading to call lower floor space a “basement” when in effect it was really more of a first floor. A one or two story house with a significant walkout exposed basement has a very different impact on the landscape and on neighbors as its mass is really a full story higher as viewed from most sides. Our answer was to attach the inclusion or exclusion of basement space to the amount of exposed wall and glass area. We hoped the limited glass area would be a deterrent to scraping back hillsides because it would not yield very high value interior spaces. We cannot help but see this structure as an example of exactly what concerned us. This building proposes to cut into the hillside and scrape back the grade to allow the basement to function as a first floor. The glass area is limited, so it may adhere to the letter of the bylaw, but not to the spirit.

F.6. It is hard to know how well the roads fit to the existing curves of the landscape. Based on retaining and stonework throughout the front portions of the site, it appears that natural curves were altered and the amount of site surface that was dedicated to roadway and parking areas was noteworthy for a property that is meant to be a single family residence, even with an agricultural use.

F.9. Similar to points mentioned above, the existing alteration to this site is shocking. We do not know what trees or other natural features have been removed in the work that has been done thus far, but it appeared that stonewalls had been removed in sections. The original building is a historic house and the property in its original state could have been considered a community asset with its rural and agrarian character. With the density of buildings, roads and hardscape at the Indian Hill Rd end of the property it is now more characteristic of a suburban development.

F.10. Due to the significant alteration of the natural environment, and amount of hardscaping and clearing it is difficult for us to believe that the wetlands on the site and even on neighboring properties are not being impacted.

F.11. The project does contemplate the use of solar panels.

F.12. We have no knowledge of archeological resources that may or may not exist on the site. But it is clear that stonewalls have been altered and the historic home modified and the rural character of the site completely lost.

It is the square footage of buildings that is sending this project to you for review. On the 6.82 acre lot there is currently xxx sq ft of structures. Of this total, xxx sq ft are exempted from the calculation that triggers review. These exempted spaces are not relevant to the determination of whether a project needs to be reviewed for a special permit. But, once that determination is made they do become relevant during the review process in terms of how the total number of buildings and square footage (including exempted spaces) attributes to overall building mass on the site, habitat loss, landform manipulation, neighborhood character, visibility and other impacts to neighbors.

Overall this site has been developed to an incredible extent. The density of structures, the clearing, grading and alteration of natural features, the extensive stone work, and laying down of hardener, peastone and gravel have created an overall appearance which has vastly changed the character of this property and its neighborhood, not to mention the impacts on habitat. Indian Hill Rd is one of the special places in West Tisbury that best characterizes the ideals the town has laid out in its Master Plan. It is a scenic, rural, agricultural road with houses and farms that manage to work in concert with the uniquely beautiful landscape in which they are situated. Unfortunately, due to the intensity of its development, this property now feels discordant with the existing, historical character of this part of town, and is not representative of the vision of a rural, agricultural community, in a place that is the very heart of that example.

We are a small community and to one degree or another, all neighbors. It is not easy or comfortable to look at someone's ideals for their property and find concern. In this case we unfortunately feel that this project just hits on too many issues that are the very things the bylaw was designed to protect against. A special permit is supposed to be just that, a special situation that is allowed for when a project is able to demonstrate strong alignment with the criteria set out in section F. We do not see that in evidence in this case. Furthermore, we are particularly concerned about the precedent it sets for the future relevance of the bylaw if a special permit is granted when so many of the criteria are unmet. We respectfully urge the Planning Board to deny the special permit and uphold the intent of this bylaw that was resoundingly supported at Town Meeting.

Sincerely,

Ivory Littlefield, Sam Look, Heikki Soikkeli and Amy Upton, former members of the Preserve West Tisbury Subcommittee