

March 16, 2022

Fr: Kerry McDonald and Richard Redding  
241 Webster Hwy, Temple, NH 03084

**Re: Proposed Commercial Hospitality Business at Stepping Stones**

Dear Members of the Temple Select Board, Conservation Commission and ZBA,

We have been property owners at 241 Webster Hwy. in Temple for over 20 years. We own 20 acres that includes our home, cottage, 3 story gambrel barn and woods.

We are sending you this email because we do not support – and in fact, object – to the establishment of a commercial hospitality business and hotel/lodging at the Homestead at the new Stepping Stones Farm and Event Center at 19 Putnam Road and 11 Pony Farm Lane.

While we are not ‘abutters’, the location of our property and the proximity of our home to Webster Hwy (<100’ set back) will be directly impacted by this commercial endeavor, and we strongly believe it will have a negative effect on our property value and our desire for a quiet rural life.

We became aware of this commercial proposal when Richard was approached by Boo Martin to sign a petition that she generated asking ‘neighbors’ to support her intent to run a commercial event center on her property (see attached email from Boo Martin, dated 2/15/22). Her actual petition states:

***Stepping Stones Farm & Event Center has NOT adversely affected the value of my property on Webster Highway in Temple by being obnoxious or injurious to me or my family. There have been no incidences of excessive noise, odor, smoke, refuse matter, vibration, traffic, dust, fumes, light, glare, drainage, or other conditions that are associated with Stepping Stones since September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020.***

Instead of garnering our support for her commercial business, it raised our curiosity. We decided against signing the petition after reading through the items listed on the ZBA Martin file, Temple committee minutes pertaining to the subject, and Stepping Stones website and marketing efforts.

We found the petition

- Neither factual nor forthright –
  - it referenced 15 weddings instead of 20 weddings/year which appeared in the original application for a special exception permit;

- no mention that it calls for up to 99 attendees per wedding/event plus ancillary vendors/caterers, entertainment staff, etc; and that there will be access to alcohol;
- no mention of # of other events per year;
- only mentions 2 abutters who oppose the Event Center when several abutters have written to the Select Board and ZBA opposing her efforts. Additionally, the Wilton Planning Board submitted a letter opposing the Event center.
- Disingenuous: it only speaks to past activities which do not equate to the scale of her commercial proposal for an Event Center yet implies that by signing the petition, the signatory endorses the approval of a future commercial Event Center.

Our keys concerns include:

- **Lack of Clarity of the actual Commercial establishment**

After reading all the public information on Stepping Stones commercial proposal – we’re still not clear about the facts including

- How many total events is she proposing per year? I.e., weddings, corporate events, fundraisers, etc.
- No mention that alcohol will be served at these events nor if there are permits pertaining to distribution of alcohol?
- Does the Event Center meet parking regulations/building safety/ fire codes/septic & water codes?
- Is this a ‘special exception permit’ or piggy backing off ‘agritourism’?
- Which committees need to approve it?
- Who enforces the “Cease and Desist” order dated 9/15/21 when events are continuing to occur?

- **Zoning Ordinances and Adhering to Setback Requirements**

We understand that The Stepping Stones Event Center commercial proposal violates setback requirements. We believe that zoning ordinances should apply to all residents regardless of how long they’ve owned property in Temple. Does someone who has lived here >50 years receive an exception over someone who’s owned property for 10, 20, 30+ years?

- **Traffic & Parking issues on Webster Hwy related to Commercial Event Center**

- As everyone knows in Temple, Webster Hwy is not a ‘highway’ – far from it. It’s a country road used primarily by homeowners on or near Webster Hwy. Much of it is a narrow (1.5 lane) with numerous curves with blind spots. In front of our property, it narrows to the point that only 1 vehicle can fit through. There are limited to no shoulders and there are many large old growth trees and rocks that line the street. It’s extremely dark at night. Many residents living on or near Webster Hwy walk on this road with their children & dogs.
- A dramatic increase in the # vehicles due to this Event Center will negatively impact the condition of the road, stability of calverts, traffic, accidents and ultimately, our property value and lifestyle.

- According to John Bielagus' letter dated 7/12/21, he comments that there is plenty of "off street parking" for this Event Center. Where?
  - We believe that there will be an increase in police and emergency services related to this Event Center
    - According to a document submitted to John Kieley from the SRPC dated 7/9/21, the author, Lisa Murphy, Senior Planner, states that
      - this Event Center could generate 299 additional vehicles on Saturdays, and 263 additional vehicles on Sundays – that's in addition to an average of 226 (2019 #s) vehicles daily. That's doubling the # of vehicles on the weekends by people attending Stepping Stones Event Center – who will have access to alcohol for hours.
        - Keep in mind that SRPC tracks vehicles on Webster Hwy near Burton Hwy and Putnam Road – which is on the Wilton-side of Webster Hwy – and feeds those #s to NHDOT. We talked with SRPC's Transportation Planner. The estimated average daily traffic at that same location in 2020 is 196. And they picked that location due to a culvert located there.
        - They are not tracking average daily traffic on Webster Hwy between Route-101 and the Martin property – which we suspect is significantly lower than on the Wilton-side of Webster Hwy, and an increase in traffic due to the proposed Event Center will have an even greater negative impact.
        - A recount will occur this summer. **We ask that the Temple Select Board/ZBA make an official request that SRPC conducts an additional count on Webster Hwy between R-101 and the Martin property; we believe that Event traffic will access Stepping Stones from Route-101. Please note that SPRC stated that special requests are on a 1st come basis.**
  - Ms. Murphy also references 'crash' data yet we believe that data is misleading since it pertains to vehicles with drivers who KNOW Webster Hwy.
    - The additional 300 vehicles due to these events will be traveling on a road that they're not familiar with and yet, they will be driving late at night after having access to alcohol at these events.
    - Access to Webster Hwy from Route 101 – can be extremely dangerous. Entering from R-101 east requires reducing speed limits to 25mph to make the right hand turn; and, crossing R-101 from the west requires speed reduction to 25mph and often coming to a complete stop if there is oncoming traffic while 18-wheelers are barreling down the mountain.
- **Noise**
    - This is a quiet rural community. There have already been several 'noise' complaints including the complaint on 5/21/21 indicating that events at the Martin property greatly exceed the limits of the Temple Zoning Noise Ordinance.

- The original Special Exception Application acknowledged that Stepping Stones can not meet Temple Noise Ordinance.
- In her initial application, Boo included information from Cross-Spectrum Acoustics which she has retained yet refused to allow an independent objective consultant on the property to assess noise levels.
- Promises by Stepping Stones Event Center to not hold music outside have not been kept.
- Stepping Stones states that they'll require guests to sign a document promising not to be loud, and will give them 3 chances (3 noise complaints) before they are required to pay \$1000 that goes to Stepping Stones. That is not a solution that helps the neighborhood at all. In fact, it's benefiting Stepping Stones Event Center.

- **Piggy-backing on Agritourism**

- Agritourism is designed to help farmers to enhance their underlying operations of their “working farm” by attracting visitors to observe a working farm in action.
- To the best of our knowledge, the Martin property has never been a “working farm.”
  - No agricultural activity – no cultivation, conservation or tillage of crops
  - No orchards (6 fruit trees is not an orchard); no livestock; no forestry.
  - No gardens of any magnitude, no fruit stands, no you-picks, etc.
  - According to John Bielagus’ letter dated 7/12/21, there are currently 2 mini horses, 2 mini donkeys, 16 chickens and 6 fruit trees on the Martin property.

That is not a “working farm.” It appears that there are plans to establish agricultural use of the property in the future assuming approval of a \$10K grant.

Calling your property a “farm” doesn’t make it a “working farm” any more than us raising pygmy goats for years makes our “Farm” a ‘working farm.’”

- The Martin property has primarily been a charming, small-scale equine therapeutic operation. For a long time, the Martin property was made up of Pony Farm, a girls summer camp, and Horse Power, an equine therapeutic riding center for people with physical, mental and emotional challenges. Kerry sat on the Horse Power Board of Directors for a period of time. As a non-profit, Horse Power included private and group lessons, equine workshops, vaulting and driving, and other related programs. In 2005, there were ~40 horses on the property.

These programs did not add traffic to Webster Hwy nor did they disrupt the quality of life of the neighborhood.

It is wrong to conflate the experiences of a small-scale, non-profit organization to the projected commercial activities proposed by Stepping Stones.

- We suspect that the Stepping Stones’ is attempting to use “agritourism” to get approval to move forward. However, we believe that the underlying objective is to increase the property value since any ‘approvals’ of a commercial Event Center will stay with the property when it’s sold. In 2020 Boo Martin considered selling the property to

Touchstone but the deal fell through yet clearly she has recently considered selling her property.

- **Devaluation of our Property Value**

- We agree with the opinion stated in the letter from Wadleigh, Starr and Peters, dated 8/30/21, on behalf of abutters Mr. Alec MacMartin and Ms, Arlene Laurenitis, that approval of a commercial Event Center will diminish our property value. Two letters from realtors were submitted to Temple – one from Andrew Peterson and one from Sally Mann – both friends of Boo Martin. We were shocked at their letters and opinions.
  - Andrew Peterson’s letter, dated 5/29/21, listed comps that were not comparable to what is being proposed by Stepping Stones.
  - Sally Mann’s letter, dated 4/15/21, stated “...as a prior equestrian facility and summer camp, the property is accustomed to having activities, events and traffic associated with operating...” and later states, “as a neighbor, that is a good thing!” That statement is a false equivalent. The proposed Event Center involves numerous weddings and events with up to 99 attendees; traffic increases of up to 263 cars on Saturdays and another 300 on Sundays. Can you imagine weddings on both Saturdays and Sundays numerous times during the wedding season?! We ARE neighbors – and in our opinion – that is NOT a good thing! We can’t imagine that any property owner in Temple would think that’s a good thing, perhaps especially those located on North Road.
  - The Wilton Planning Board submitted a letter to the Temple ZBA stating its opposition “...the proposed project appears to be incompatible with surrounding land uses...proposed commercial activities is not limited seasonally or to daytime hours; many will involve alcohol, are likely to create excess noise, increase traffic, especially after dark...the effects would **adversely affect the area’s rural environment and the quality of life of Wilton residents...likely to cause the value of certain Wilton properties to decrease.**”

- **Unintended consequences of Setting a Precedent**

We believe that if this commercial Event Center proceeds via a special exception and if it’s approved via Agritourism, it will set a precedent for Temple and the possible ramifications include:

1. These rights will not die with the Martin family ownership of the property. If granted, the rights to run a commercial operation of this magnitude passes to the new owner, and all that implies. And it’s not good. One abutter, Fred Roedel, who is in the hospitality business, wrote on 6/4/21 about that very concern.
2. While ‘special exceptions’ are granted on a case-by-case basis, what will Temple do when the next property owner who wants a commercial event center or other commercial use asks for a special exception due violations of zoning ordinances? Approve it? Not approve it? What if the town denies the application – will it face legal ramifications?
3. We believe that Temple will be opening Pandora’s box to commercial endeavors in Temple that will change the rural nature and quiet lifestyle of our neighborhood. We are

not against change or growth but a commercial enterprise of this magnitude at this location, we strongly believe that it is not the vision we see for the future of Temple.

We appreciate your time and consideration.