



Wilton Planning Board
Town of Wilton
42 Main Street
Wilton, NH 03086

Zoning Board of Adjustment
Temple Town Office
PO Box 191
Temple, NH 03084

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We understand that you (the “Zoning Board”) have determined that a proposed project to conduct a range of commercial activities on lots located at 19 Putnam Road and 11 Pony Farm Lane in Temple (the “Lots”) may have regional impact, as described in NH RSA 36:56. The Wilton Planning Board appreciates the opportunity to identify its concerns about the application of Isabelle Martin, presumably on behalf of the owners of the Lots and Stepping Stones Farm & Event Center LLC (“Stepping Stones”), for a special exception permitting these activities. Neither Alec MacMartin nor Matt Fish participated in the Planning Board’s discussion.

Based on the documents of record in this case, and information available on the Stepping Stones website (the “website”), it appears that exceptions for prior non-conforming activities on the Lots are likely irrelevant. Whether or not additional exceptions or necessary variances are sought, the application before the Zoning Board raises a number of issues for residents of Wilton.

Our Understanding of the Application and the Proposed Businesses

One of the Lots abuts Residential/Agricultural properties in Wilton. The larger Lot fronts on the Webster Highway which is the continuation of Burton Highway from Wilton. The Burton/Webster highways connect major Routes 31 and 101 in Wilton and Temple.

We understand that the Lots are located, at least in part, in the Aquifer Protection Overlay District in Temple; the aquifer continues into Wilton and is protected there under its Aquifer Protection District ordinance. In addition, Mill Brook, the only Class A water in the Wilton watershed, originates in Temple before converging downstream with Stony Brook. The Wilton Watershed District protects Mill Brook.

The application requests approval to conduct commercial gatherings and celebrations, weddings, a vacation rental business, corporate and other retreats and training, and community and non-profit events and fundraisers. The days and hours during which any of these activities would be conducted are not limited. The applicant would restrict indoor (barn) weddings to 99 guests (not including employees or service personnel) and outdoor weddings to 125 (based on the March 17, 2021, Business Plan presented to the Zoning Board). On-site lodging occupancy of the Homestead appears to be limited to 14 (six bedrooms) and the Lodge to 24 (ten bedrooms) (based on the website), whether or not in connection with retreats or events.

Otherwise, attendance at events is not limited. Other than weddings, the use of the Lots is not exclusive to a group of customers. Amplified music would be limited to the barn and required to end at 11:00 pm; there is no information with respect to other amplified sound at outdoor weddings, or music or other sound at other events, indoor or outdoor.

Alcohol is proposed to be provided at weddings. The application does not address the availability of alcohol at other events. Meals are intended to be provided at weddings, as well as at other retreats and events (based on the website). It is unclear where they will be prepared and/or consumed.

Commercial lodging at the site appears to range from individual room rentals to use of an entire building (based on the website). We understand that this would likely qualify the venue as a hotel for state licensure and permitting purposes, including fire and sanitation requirements.

Wilton Planning Board Concerns

We are concerned that the application lacks sufficient information to allow us, others qualifying as abutters, or the Zoning Board to accurately assess the potential impact of this project. As noted above, information about the nature and conduct of the proposed businesses and the site is incomplete. Details about each of the proposed uses, and how they will be conducted, should be provided. In addition, among other things, a current survey of the Lots, information about the septic systems that will serve the lodging facilities, reliable projections about the impact on traffic along the Burton/Webster Highways, compliant sound level studies, specific identification of parking spaces and how they will be surfaced, stormwater management, and a comprehensive list of existing and required state and local approvals should be made available.

In the absence of more specific information that would further inform our review, however, the Wilton Planning Board has identified a number of general concerns about this project.

Danger to the Aquifer

As set forth in the Wilton Master Plan, the essential purpose of its Aquifer Protection and Watershed districts is to protect the quality of the town's water supply, current and prospective, by, among other things, keeping organic and inorganic waste to a minimum. Activity in Temple that undermines water quality will affect that source in Wilton.

The contaminants likely to be generated by the proposed uses differ in nature and volume from those produced by agricultural activities. Extensive on-site parking, particularly in the absence of a stormwater management plan, increases the risk that petroleum-based products and other fluids and particulate contaminants from vehicles will infiltrate the aquifer, as well as affect the water quality of Mill Brook. Moreover, potentially insufficient sanitation facilities for the proposed uses could fail, with the same results. It is difficult without additional information to assess the extent of these risks. Because protection of local water sources is paramount to Wilton, they must be further identified and addressed.

Noise

Although no reliable study about sound levels at abutting lot lines has been conducted, based on informal tests not replicating actual conditions, it seems unlikely that the project will be able to comply with the Temple noise ordinance. Proposed guest deposits and penalties payable to the applicant do not address the interests of abutters. Moreover, additional traffic along the Burton/Webster highways would generate objectionable noise, particularly at night, even beyond abutting property.

In addition, studies indicate that intermittent and/or continuous loud noise can detrimentally affect a wide range of wildlife in an area. Needless to say, Wilton and neighboring communities are committed to protecting the region's wildlife and their habitats.

Traffic on Burton/Webster Highways

The proposed uses, particularly weddings, fundraisers and similar events, will generate substantial concentrated vehicle traffic on the Burton/Webster highways, frequently late at night. In addition to excess noise, this traffic activity could accelerate wear and tear on the road, create congestion at intersections in Wilton, and increase the risk of accidents involving vehicles on this unlit, narrow and twisting road.

In addition, given the likelihood that online driving directions will route both westbound traffic travelling to events, and eastbound traffic returning from them, through the center of Wilton, the same risks will affect the roads from the Burton Highway/Forest Road intersection through the middle of Town.

Potential Burden on Police and Emergency Services Mutual Aid from Wilton

The application acknowledges further fire protection measures to be, but not yet, implemented in the barn, but does not address the other structures. Fire hazards increase the likelihood that Wilton emergency resources will have to be deployed as mutual aid to Temple, reducing protection for Wilton. It is also difficult to assess whether emergency access to the facilities at the site would be impaired.

In addition, the risks of increased traffic on the Burton/Webster highways noted above could be exacerbated by alcohol consumption, making accidents more likely. They could require other Wilton emergency service assistance, to the same effect.

Summary

Based on the application, the proposed project appears to be incompatible with surrounding land uses, particularly in Wilton bordering the Lots and along the Burton/Webster highways. The range of 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, and could endanger the aquifer and potential water sources shared with Wilton. Individually and collectively, the effects would adversely affect the area's rural environment and the quality of life of Wilton residents. In the absence of further reliable information otherwise, the proposed project would seem likely to cause the value of certain Wilton properties to decrease. Accordingly, the project as described should not be approved.