

A letter for the Cape Vincent Planning Board

Apr 8, 2024

Dear board members:

My name is James McQueeney. Our family has had a (historic) home at Point and Joseph Streets for more than 40 years. We have also been seasonal residents and property owners on Carleton Island for about a decade.

As the board proceeds with the hearing on the approvals required for the Carleton Villa restoration, I would like to raise a precautionary point indirectly (but significantly) related to your ongoing process.

Apart from the formal permitting process you are obliged to follow, there is a parallel track that has not been given the attention it deserves. That is the financial wherewithal and development track record of applicant Clapp.

There is barely any significant public record supporting his financial or practical ability to achieve his stated goal, or to match the aspirational expectations of the board and community to restore the mansion.

Independent analysts speculate the task could be as high as \$35-\$40 million dollars. Clapp himself hasn't disputed a number very close to that sum.

Aside from the minimal cost incurred to acquire the property, and a negligible amount of site work, Clapp, after two years, has provided little evidence of even permitted structural changes to the mansion itself.

The board appears to be taking the applicant at his word that Clapp has the financial and experiential resources to complete this task.

The campground proposal to get funds to fulfill his promises, despite all his (incomplete) renderings and submissions, should be giving board members a sobering cause for pause, and it is by no means a reassurance of any kind.

The notion that camper fees would constitute a financial underpinning to the restoration is frankly ludicrous

The board, at this time, is not strictly obligated to compel him to provide a financial and professional accountability at this point in the process. The massive scale of this venture should suggest otherwise.

Yet, Clapp, with hardly any bit of searchable proof that he is capable of undertaking this renovation task, has been telling the board, in effect, “trust me now, and I’ll verify later.” Really? Then prove your bona fides.

The board and both island and mainland residents have been left only to Google that background. When you do so, what little of his professional, financial or even personal life that comes up is troubling.

The board and the community, and even some islanders, may want to see the villa restoration done, and done right, myself included. It could become a tourist attraction of the 1000 Islands region, thus providing spin-off economic and quality of life benefits to Cape Vincent which has been slower to prosper than most other river communities.

I would like to suggest that it is surely in the interest of the board and the greater Cape Vincent community to press the applicant to show he has the resources to undertake this task BEFORE being allowed the permit(s) to start.

Projects of these size sometimes eclipse the technical and practical ability of small towns and their staffs to evaluate and oversee its true integrity. Without that evaluation early in the process, well-intentioned public servants serving on this board can easily be left in an embarrassing political lurch. However, it is often at this very point that developers have the stronger upper hand—but they shouldn’t Prudence would suggest that the applicant provide the board with detailed evaluations of his prior development work, and submit preliminary, certified, independent reassurance as to his corporate and personal financial standing.

The campground-financing scheme is not a good start by this “developer.” However, the applicant should be given more time to make a better, more credible second impression, by letting the board AND the community have more facts about someone who may become their partner for many years. That means suspending the permit approval process until he does so, or the leverage will be lost to guarantee he has the ability to complete what you may allow him to start. The evidence and representations given to this board and the community so far are skimpy and suspicious.

James McQueeney

Point Street

“Otis Starkey House”

Cape Vincent

“The writer is a member of Friends of Carleton Island, a group of more than 60 seasonal residents of Carleton Island who have assembled in opposition to the proposed commercialization of the head of Carleton Island.”