

Letter: Carleton Villa restoration is costing taxpayers money

Aug 24, 2024

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The deterioration of the villa on Carleton Island. Contributed.

I am writing to express concerns over the mounting costs to the taxpayers of Cape Vincent related to the development of the Carleton Villa.

Obtained through Freedom of Information Law requests, below is a chart reflecting costs already incurred by the Town of Cape Vincent. The chart only reflects costs through June. Actual costs to the taxpayers are expected to far exceed these numbers.

- Cost to taxpayers for private villa project
 - Legal fees through June: \$10,165
 - Engineering fees through June: \$3,221
 - Grant application: \$500
 - Total: \$13,884

I, like many, was very pleased when the Villa was purchased with plans for restoration. The idea of a hotel and restaurant was exciting. However, as Supervisor Aubertine stated, this project has become costly to the town. (Bouchard 2024) As taxpayers, are we expected to fund this project for someone else's profit?

In May, the town paid to sponsor a Restore NY grant for \$2 million of taxpayer money to stabilize the Villa. Per the guidelines, if the money is awarded, the municipality is responsible for a minimum of 10% or \$200,000. The public was told that this grant would not cost the town anything. (Empire State Development 2024) The Town Board claimed that this money could help reimburse them for the many expenses it has already paid for this project. Unfortunately, the grant guidelines clearly state that the award will not reimburse any expenses incurred before the application date. (Empire State Development 2024)

Fortunately, the State's grant committee saw through the folly of this project and denied the grant. However, another round of funding is coming up this summer, and we are uncertain if the application will be considered a second time. Even if this specific grant continues to be denied, the Town Board endorsed grant application explicitly states that other public funding will be sought. Therefore, it remains important to consider the matching \$200,000 amount from the town as a very real possibility. The town should not provide any support for any more private grant applications for this project.

In the meantime, the Town Board continues to authorize more and more bills related to this development. The Town Supervisor signed an agreement for reimbursement in May. Now, three months later, it has yet to be signed or funded by the developer. What is the town's plan to ensure reimbursement? As of June, the town had spent a total of \$13,884.65 on legal, engineering, and application fees according to information obtained through Freedom of Information Law (FOIL). At no time was there a signed agreement to reimburse the Town for the \$200,000 obligation, if the Restore NY grant was awarded.

It is expected that, by now, the bills exceed \$20,000. How long are taxpayers going to pay the costs for a private development that is never likely to happen?

While there were wild speculations in the grant application about possible future revenues to the town, in fact, no revenues would be generated from the \$2 million for stabilization only. Considering the estimate of \$3 million to \$4 million to replace the roof on the Boldt Yacht House (McDowell 2024), it is easy to see that to restore the entire Carleton Villa would easily cost tens of millions of dollars. The restoration of Boldt Castle by the Thousand Islands Bridge Authority has cost more than \$50 million and has been ongoing since the 1970s. To date, no financial analysis has been provided to support such an investment. Instead, a record number of homes on Carleton Island have gone on the market this year, with at least one seller stating the wish to sell before values plummet.

Island residents use very little resources in relation to the taxes they pay. Their children do not attend local schools. They receive no water or sewer services. They are not covered by emergency services. They have no roads to maintain. If all the properties on Carleton Island depreciate because of this project, it could mean a significant loss of tax revenue, placing an additional burden on the Town of Cape Vincent.

It is also clear that a campground with open fires pits poses a serious threat to current island residents and the island as a whole. The town supplies no fire protection or emergency services to the island, even though residents pay the same tax rate for fire and ambulance. Legal precedent has been established in other commercial ventures to require that the town provides adequate emergency services. If such a precedent were enforced in this case, Cape Vincent could be required to purchase and staff a fire boat and

EMTs responsible for Carleton Island. A 2022 article in the Watertown Daily Times indicated that the cost to replace the Clayton Fire Boat would be over \$1 million dollars. (Wheeler 2022) That would not include staffing costs should those be required. If you remember, in 2022, Cape Vincent had a 53% increase in taxes, which was “due almost entirely to the new structure of the Cape Vincent Ambulance Squad.” (Gault 2021). Are we prepared for another huge tax hike to support the Villa, a private development project?

In short, we are looking at extreme costs for the Town of Cape Vincent, with little to no benefits in sight. Costs that will undoubtedly be footed by the taxpayers. The Town needs to put a stop to this now.

Christine Martin

Carleton Island

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