

Editorial: Carleton Island campground violates zoning

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Ronald Clapp, owner of Carleton Villa on Carleton Island, is proposing to renovate the villa into a bed-and-breakfast with campgrounds/glamgrounds on the back portion of 6.9 acres between the north and south bays. Courtesy of the town of Cape Vincent

Property owners on Carleton Island were surprised this week when learning of plans for a commercial development on the head of the island, near the ruins of Fort Haldimand.

Noticed by certified mail, adjacent property owners for the first time learned that the owner of the Carleton Island Villa, who purchased it and 6.9 acres in 2021, had designed a fancy campground for 46 occupants. Two hearings are Monday night.

This is beyond the public narrative that followed the villa's conveyance, one that has been solely about a proper historic restoration of the 15,000-square-foot building that has been abandoned since General Electric gave up its plans for a corporate resort in the Great Depression.

Almost immediately the plan was met with resistance — and rightly so. Carleton Island is within the Cape Vincent Island District, and the town took such care in 2019 to update its zoning laws to reflect that the islands are very different from mainland.

This is an emotional issue for the owners of the roughly 34 other homes on the island that has minimum zoning of five acres, Thousand Islands Land Trust restrictions and easements deeded when the island was carefully developed in the 1980s. It could be said that the care in the development of the island by Patten Corp. may have led to the very definition of Island District. This project does not fit in that district.

Adjacent property owner Charles Millar, in a letter to the zoning board of appeals and planning board published Friday in the Times, pointed out why, legally, this makes no sense, and why both boards should deny the special-use applications.

In Section 7 of "A Joint Comprehensive Plan for the Village and Town of Cape Vincent," the following is stated:

Area 4 Fox and Grenadier Islands in Lake Ontario and Carleton Islands in the St. Lawrence River.

Encourage: Large lot seasonal residential use with boat access. Maintain scenic resources, the natural setting and preserve open spaces to the greatest extent possible. Consider the use of open space easements and ensure adequate protection of the important historical-archeological resource, Ft. Haldiman.

Discourage: Any type of development that would diminish or degrade the unique rural community lifestyle these islands provide to their owners. Any commercial or utility development whose influence would have a negative impact on health, safety, scenic and natural resources, property values, recreational opportunities and tourism assets.

Millar's family has had a presence on the island for more than a century, and not only is Mr. Millar an expert on the island's history and its place in history, he understands the law and how Cape Vincent zoning was written to promote the continuance of uninterrupted peaceful island life.

"First, as a matter of procedure, which is of course form over substance, these are essentially two separate projects and therefore each project should have its own applications made to the Zoning Board of Appeals and to the Planning Board," Millar wrote in his letter. "As to the substance, Mr. (Ronald) Clapp's proposals are entirely inconsistent with the Town's Zoning Law intent for the land use within an Island District which is, 'focused principally on encouraging quality residential development with some capacity for limited, controlled commercial development, for example, restaurant, hotel, bed and breakfast.'"

The Cape Vincent decision-makers are urged to heed Millar's and other residents' concerns and reject the proposed development. The zoning regulations themselves provide ample grounds for this decision, but the reasons extend further. The proposed site at Government Point on Carleton Island is not only historically significant, being the location of Fort Haldimand and Native American artifacts, but also environmentally sensitive. The area, home to diverse wildlife and undisturbed riverbeds rich in archeological value, would face irreversible damage from the proposed dredging for dock installations.

Additionally, at a time when river and lakefront communities are advancing towards modern sewage treatment systems to protect the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario, the proposed development's reliance on a septic system for over 200 guests is notably lacking and outdated. Such a project would

never be approved on the mainland without proper sanitary sewer. There is a case in Henderson where the Gillhouse has not been allowed to open other than for special circumstances until a sewer line is installed. Septic systems are no longer the proper way to treat commercial sewage that would be generated here.

This case stands as one of the most significant land-use debates in Cape Vincent since the windmill proposals nearly two decades ago. And in that case an environmental impact study was required. If not outright denied, this current proposal should at least be subjected to similar rigorous environmental impact assessments to understand its full implications on the island, the St. Lawrence River, and the broader environment. Approval of this project could quickly unravel years of carefully planned residential development in the Island District, which has significantly contributed to the town, village and local schools.

The imminent threat to this cherished island, a haven for its inhabitants and a hallowed site encompassing numerous Native American burial grounds, demands a decision that fiercely safeguards its sacred and distinctive essence.

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