The Future of Carleton Island

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A site plan for Carleton Villa from the villa's website



The shoreline along South Bay of Carleton Island was cleared in the fall of 2023 by the developer proposing to build a campground as a part of the restoration of the Carleton Villa. A nearby property owner is concerned that a marina would be built here. Contributed.

Residents of Cape Vincent and the Thousand Islands region deserve clarity — and honesty — about what's really happening on Carleton Island.

For more than two years, a self-proclaimed "developer" has sought to turn the historic Carleton Villa into the centerpiece of a sprawling hotel and "glamping" resort. He's requested major zoning variances, a special use permit, and site plan approval for an operation that would introduce highdensity, commercial activity on a fragile island that has long been governed by strict conservation and zoning protections.

The "developer" is currently in ongoing litigation with the Thousand Islands Land Trust (TILT) for violating a conservation easement that protects the island's shoreline and ecosystem. The lawsuit stems from the "developer's" decision to clear trees and vegetation with heavy machinery — without any permits or approvals. The court has already issued an injunction to stop further work, and the litigation is proceeding. Court filings highlight that the long-established easement restrictions may prohibit commercial development altogether.

Yet even if that litigation were resolved tomorrow, it would not authorize the project to move forward. There remain major, unanswered questions that go far beyond the courtroom.

First, the "developer" is asking the Town to completely disregard longstanding zoning rules by granting up to thirteen setback variances — some as much as 50% — to build cabins and bathhouses dangerously close to the shoreline. Approving such sweeping exceptions would set a terrible precedent for every waterfront parcel in Cape Vincent.

Second, the environmental and infrastructure concerns are staggering. This project would disturb seven acres of sensitive shoreline, dredging bays, and building docks, beaches, and platforms — all in a fragile habitat known for bald eagles, bats, and rare plant communities. The "developer" has not provided a stormwater plan, a septic or wastewater design, and no credible study of light, noise, or traffic impacts. He hasn't even explained how guests would reach the island, park on the mainland, or how emergency services could possibly respond to a fire or medical crisis out there.

Third, the project flatly contradicts the spirit and the letter of the Town's Island District zoning code, which calls for limited, controlled commercial development consistent with the area's historic and residential character. A large-scale "glampground" resort surrounded by single-family homes is neither limited nor controlled — it's reckless.

And finally, perhaps the biggest question of all: Who exactly is this “developer”? What is his record? What’s his financial capacity to carry out a restoration estimated to cost north of $20 million? So far, the public has seen no proof of qualifications, no funding plan, and no transparency — only general assurances and “trust me” promises that could put Cape Vincent taxpayers at significant financial risk.

Cape Vincent’s Town Board and attorney have done the right thing by pausing the review until the courts rule on the ongoing litigation. The Town’s decision to pause eliminates the possibility of either the Planning Board and/or Zoning Board approving a project that very well may be prohibited by legally enforceable deed restrictions. But, if that time comes, the Town must not rubber-stamp an unproven and ill-conceived plan. The Villa deserves genuine restoration — not commercial exploitation.

It’s time to hold this “developer” to the same standards as everyone else and demand proof of competence, compliance, and credibility before a single permit is granted.

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