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Red Gate Farm was no snap

By Janet Hefler - May 4, 2006

In his report, Mr. London was not thinking about the Red Gate Farm subdivision, a proposal endorsed by town leaders and submitted by a family whose only interest was preservation, not development.

Mr. London wrote, "Applicants dread the process, the critics said, especially small property and business owners for whom the cost and delay is especially problematic, partly because the steps to be followed are not always clear; people want to know what to expect and not be subjected to an unnecessarily long process."

The MVC approval process for Red Gate Farm consumed approximately five months, spanned seven meetings and took approximately 12 hours.

Last December Caroline Kennedy and her husband, Edwin Schlossberg proposed a subdivision estate plan for the 366-acre property known as Red Gate Farm in Aquinnah designed to protect and preserve the property for their children.

The plan was to divide the property into 7 large parcels, 3 for their children, 2 to sell if necessary, 1 for the homestead that exists, and 1 declared forever undeveloped for ecological and environmental preservation.

Aquinnah holds the unique position of being the Martha's Vineyard Commission's only town-wide district of critical planning concern, a designation that applies MVC jurisdiction to the entire town.

The Kennedy plan began the MVC process on December 19 with overwhelming support from town zoning and conservation officials. The plan, which involved no construction, appeared as if it would sail right through the MVC permitting process. But that was not the case.

Sarah Thulin, Aquinnah conservation commission chairman, and Camille Rose, Aquinnah selectman and planning board chairman, attended the Red Gate Farm public hearing to support the plan. Despite their detailed explanations of Aquinnah's strict zoning and conservation restrictions, some of the commissioners expressed reservations about the staying power of the town's bylaws.

"When I'm gone, the economy of Martha's Vineyard could change. A huge estate lot may not be the best use of the land. It's difficult to conceive what could take place 50 years down the road," said Mr. Best. "That's why we've asked the local boards for input," Ms. Brown told him.

In response to Mr. Best, Ms. Thulin said, "It seems as though for the entire island of Martha's Vineyard, we're trying to preserve open space and maintain the quality of life. How can any of us have a crystal ball?"

To struggle too much on what-ifs - what could happen when we're all dead - right now, we have such rigid controls, that's not going to happen. What would you do to protect it for 100 years?"

At one point during the hearing process, Attorney Richard Renehan, representing Ms. Kennedy said, "Don't you think at some point what happens 50 years in the future is something your

grandchildren will have to worry about? Should the MVC be trying to micromanage the future?"

A few weeks after the MVC approved Red Gate Farm's application, Mr. Renahan said of the process, "There is clearly a necessity for a Martha's Vineyard Commission to have an overseeing power on an Island as fragile the Vineyard. That having been said, from the point of view of the applicants, you listen to some speechifying, if you will, that drives you right up a wall.

"The problem is it is a real minority of members who, I think, have views they want to make over and over again, and sometimes on issues that really make no sense."

For example, Mr. Renahan said, "I think sometimes some committee members try to do too much. They forget we're dealing with private property and not public land. And secondly, they're trying to get results that will last 100 years. That's not realistic."

In conclusion, Mr. Renahan said, "At the end of the day you need a commission, but it could be a happier process than it is now. And I say that with great respect for the many knowledgeable people who give a lot of time to the process."

Red Gate Farm DRI Process timeline

Nov. 17, 2005: Pre-application meeting with staff

Dec. 19, 2005: LUPC meeting; 1 hour, 25 minutes

Jan. 9, 2006: LUPC meeting; 1 hour, 21 minutes

Feb. 2: Public hearing; 2 hours, 30 minutes

Feb. 13: LUPC meeting; 1 hour, 21 minutes

March 6: LUPC meeting; 1 hour, 23 minutes

April 3: LUPC meeting; 2 hours

April 6: Public hearing and vote: 2 hours



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