Town of Barnard forms subcommittees to examine housing-related concerns

By Aaron Rubin
Standard Correspondent

The time has come for Barnard to renew its Town Plan, as is required by the Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission every eight years, Barnard Planning Commission chair Steve Cota told the Standard this week.

As part of developing what Cota calls a "wishlist" for what Barnard's new plan "wants to promote or discourage in the future," committees will be investigating the future development and fitness of short-term rentals and large, so-called "McMansion" homes in town.

Cota says these topics have been discussed vigorously amongst residents. To address them, two volunteer-run subcommittees have been formed with the intention "to look into those two issues and see what they can find out, how the community feels, what kind of regulations can be proposed," and "what other towns are considering or may have passed" in regards to specific regulations, he said.

As these subcommittees were recently established, they are both merely in an "information gathering" phase to better understand the issues as they relate to Barnard, added Cota. "It's just fact finding and looking at the issue," he said.

In regards to short-term rentals, Cota says the decision to form a subcommittee was not directly in response to the social media chatter amongst residents, but to the growing relevance of the topic for many communities. He said that the formation of the subcommittee is a way for Barnard to "get out in front of potential problems that might occur down the road." Part of that process will include considering how other larger communities, such as Woodstock and Killington, are responding to the issue and how it can be applied to a smaller community like Barnard.

Cota acknowledged that there are "strong feelings on both sides of the argument" pertaining to the regulation of short-term rentals properties. He said that some homeowners believe they have the freedom to utilize property they own as they see fit, while others may feel uncomfortable with unfamiliar faces regularly renting out an Airbnb-type property that could be owned by someone who does not even live in Vermont.

"If you have an apartment over the garage that you want to rent out as part of a short-term thing, well, fine. Why not? You've made the investment in your property and you can make a few bucks on the side to pay our exorbitant tax bills, then why not?" he said. "[But] If you are just some venture capitalist in California buying up properties in rural Vermont so that you can turn them into basically hotels with no services, then that's a completely different deal."

"Hopefully, the solution lies somewhere in the middle," said Cota.

In addition to the subcommittee for investigating short-term rentals is another one to research ridgeline zoning. Considering how to enforce this type of zoning came about when a property owner cleared land atop of a ridge overlooking Barnard to construct a "McMansion," Cota said.

In the case of the home overlooking the town, Cota said its exterior lighting "looks like an airport beacon at night and people who used to be looking at a wooded hillside are now looking at a McMansion with lights all over it."

Like the short-term rental subcommittee, the volunteer group for the ridgeline zoning committee will also be collecting information on these types of properties and whether they fit the character of Barnard. Cota says they will also consider the views of property owners who purchased land and pay taxes and oppose homes that could be an eyesore in the community.

While both zoning issues will be considered as part of the new Town Plan to be revamped in August this year, Cota says that the required research time and regulatory hurdles mean that specific regulations for ridgeline and short-term rental zoning are not likely to materialize until sometime in 2026. He added that it would eventually be up to the town to vote for the implementation of any regulations.