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Top contributor

· 1h ·

Good morning, Barnstead. I am writing to you today as your Building Inspector. I have been doing this now in Barnstead for around 15 years. Thankfully, most of these years have been smooth and enjoyable! This past year, unfortunately, I cannot say the same. In recent weeks there have been some postings on here and on the World Wide Web and other Facebook pages, regarding issues between the town, that names me, Erin Stone, a member of our Planning Board and Jared Hanselman, a member of our Zoning Board, and their property here in Barnstead. Many of the accusations / statements I have read are simply erroneous, mis characterized, half-truths or just plain uninformed. Much of what I have read in recent days is what I would characterize as "rage baiting". I see this as someone posting inflammatory comments to work folks into a rage, and then skillfully directing their rage towards an individual or entity. For instance, it is being said that I attacked Erin Stone in a public meeting and threatened to sue her. Not true, the recording doesn't lie. In fact, it was me who was attacked. Further, insinuating all over social media that the Town of Barnstead is unfairly targeting farming is preposterous and couldn't be further from the truth. It's easy to see now this is merely an attempt at deflecting their property issues onto the farming community. We love our farmers and anyone who knows me knows I support them personally and professionally! Another, I am biased, unfair and picking fights with them for no reason. No, I have walked away, sucked it up, bit my tongue on more than one occasion with these folks. While it is true I am completely fed up with what feels like cyber bullying and a whole lot of gaslighting from certain individuals, I have done my best to remain unbiased and fair. That's only to name a couple. I've long been a believer that when controversy strikes, it's usually best to hit the pause button, instead of throwing more dung against the wall, with the hope things will settle down on their own. I have also learned over the years that indeed there are times when you're given no choice but to speak out. For me this is that time where I feel I must dispel the constant mis information published and spoken by Erin Stone. It's frankly exhausting dealing with this, but the alternative of allowing this mis information to go unanswered, is no longer an option for me. Unfortunately, In the past 6-9 months I have been publicly slandered, humiliated and outright mistreated by a few members of our community. Today it continues in a social media / blogging campaign by Erin Stone and Jared Hanselman. That for me is just a terrible place to be. I have no desire to go- tit for tat, with these very angry and unhappy people, but I may just have no choice. Keep in mind when this initially started in a public meeting, I made the decision to let it go, try and forgive, and hope things will smooth over with time. This unfortunately did not happen. Perhaps, silence, instead of pushing back, emboldened the bad behavior? With That being said, I've decided that this is one of those times I will work on setting the record straight. I also believe I have a duty to inform the public, who I work for, of the facts about what has transpired regarding The Fox and Crow Farm here in Barnstead. Rather than leaving you to the rumors, half-truths and mis characterizations (from both sides) I will just lay it all out on the table in full disclosure. This may be long.

Before we can get into the current issues, I'll give you a quick backstory. Earlier in the year the building department received a call from Bob Abbott of RM Builders regarding issues he felt he was having with the Planning Board while attempting to gain approval for a 7 lot subdivision on Will Smith Rd and Province Rd. He strongly felt he was being mistreated. I've known Bob for many years, also a Barnstead resident, who also helped us all, and generously donated towards building the Barnstead Police Department. I agreed to look over his file and saw what I thought were some questionable items, so I decided to at least attend the next meeting to see for myself. The first meeting I attended I was honestly appalled at the Chairpersons behavior and treatment of the applicant; it was not so much the issues being raised, but the way it was being conducted. Not only in the words used, but also the tone taken and body language displayed by the chair especially. I'm a firm believer that all people appearing before the board (whether you like them or not) should be treated with respect. This was not what I witnessed. It was so egregious at one point I had to raise my hand to speak. With a very calm tone and professionally (I have the recording) I basically rebuked the chairwomen on several of the board's positions. Well folks let me just state this did not sit well with Nancy or Erin. I attended a few meetings after that and spoke both in favor of the applicant's ideas and in many cases in the Towns favor. I explained to Bob when I felt the board was right (even if he didn't like it) and Bob was always respectful and amendable. I explained to the board my thoughts when I felt they were going too far, even when they didn't like it, however respectful by these two members was never the case. I should mention the other board members were fine, even though I didn't agree with all they said or did, my issues were mainly with Nancy and Erin. At one meeting after I offered some ideas, Nancy publicly accused me of being Bob's friend. My response was, of course we are friendly toward each other, and why wouldn't I be? I like to think I am friendly with everyone in this room, or in this town for that matter. From there, the energy and demeanor of two members of the PB (Nancy and Erin) shifted in a very negative way towards me and the applicant. On one occasion, my jaw hit the floor as I listened to Erin Stone speak with much disdain, hollering disrespectfully at the applicants attorney. I have attended a good number of meetings in my life, this one took the cake for the worse mannerism and decorum I've ever witnessed by a board member. I am not the only person who witnessed this and was left shocked. The last meeting I attended was when Erin and Nancy presented a list of stipulations, that included the removal of the building inspector (me) for this subdivision, going so far as to refer to me as an investor / partner with RM Builders, which couldn't have been further from the truth. It was an outright lie designed to smear me and my name, including a more private campaign by Nancy to suggest I be replaced as Building Inspector all together. In a nutshell, they basically implied I was using my

position as Building Inspector for financial gain, which of course is absolutely, unequivocally false, and outright slanderous. (Again, I have the tapes). I was so humiliated and honestly the implication deeply hurt. I sat there quietly for what seemed to be 30 minutes and just composed myself. To think after 15-years of maintaining honest and good working relations with the folks in this town, that I had just been so cheaply and publicly reduced to this, in front of everyone, as being a sellout. When public input came, I raised my hand and was allowed to stand up and speak. I very calmly stated that I didn't think what they did was legal (turned out it wasn't), that I would be consulting with my attorney in the morning and basically, I told them I was very hurt. I did also tell them that they publicly defamed me, then I got up and left the building. In reflection, though at my expense, I now see it made good theatre for them, and I took it as their way of signaling to me that there is a heavy price to pay when you dare to disagree with either of them. Ultimately, this has nothing to do with the issues that came up on their property, but Erin & Jared falsely claim this is where it all began for them.

Now fast forward to later in the summer of 2024. Complaints began to come in regarding the then, Fox and Crow Farm, which had a heavy online presence. In their ads on Facebook, Website, Air BnB etc. they advertised (amongst many other things) two different vacation cabin rentals on their property. As some of you may recall, in 2024 voters voted in favor of a Short Term rental ordinance, which in part required owners to apply for a site review to the Planning Board for all Short-Term Rentals. In 2023, voters voted in the definition of Short-Term Rentals to specifically state "a business" so these rentals would be subject to section 8:1 of our ordinance, which again required PB, Health and Selectboard approval. In fact, Erin Stone co-authored both the short-term rental ordinance and the previous year's definition. It is important to note that they operated two separate rentals on their property, but never applied to either of their own boards for approval. Folks in town grew concerned, some infuriated that they were ignoring the very ordinance they wrote, to enforce on others, but not themselves. This did not leave a good taste in people's mouths, especially when considering the great demands she herself placed on RM Abbott builders for traffic studies, road engineering, etc., claiming the extra traffic (on the same road, less than a ½ mile away from her property that she conducted the rental and various other businesses on) would be detrimental to the Town. Many in our town feel it boldly displays the appearance of do as I say, not as I do. How could I disagree with these sentiments?

This is only one of many layers. It turned out that one of the cabins was never permitted. I had this happen on two other occasions and had to straighten them both out. Each time they were caught building with no permit, I was very friendly with them, but I required them to do what everyone else was required to do. The first occasion was around the time they first moved into town. They began erecting a large barn with no permit, Erin displayed it on FB and it was reported to the town. Once I contacted them, Jared was pleasant and responsive, came in and took care of it. The second time was when Erin was displaying one of the log cabins he was building and it was discovered he started building again with no permit. Again, Jared was pleasant and responded quickly, dropped off an application, and left a check with my office, on the check memo he wrote "Hunting cabin". He was given a permit for a hunting cabin. He and Erin both explained how they wanted to try their hand at log cabins and always wanted to build a cool hunting cabin where they could stay warm and dry while hunting. As an accessory building to the main structure, I felt this was certainly an allowed use.

I should also state that I feel I got along well with Jared, I considered him a friend. I purchased a pig from him at one point, made many online purchases during Covid with them and even visited their store on several occasions. This is what also made it extra awkward for me every time I had to jump on his case to get a permit. There was no question, they both understood they needed permits after the second issue. Despite going through that entire process of building with no permit - twice, it turns out there was a third building which they never disclosed. They had erected a second unpermitted cabin on the property. Which leads me to wonder if the strategy is to only pull permits if caught? Here is where the plot thickens. Not only were there permitting issues, but the "cabins" it turns out were being used as vacation rentals to the public. This changed everything. It meant people would have assumed and trusted they were safe and fit for habitation, inspected by the town of Barnstead. When in fact one of them was not supposed to even exist, and the other was granted under the condition that it was for their personal use as an accessory structure. Once they used these buildings for rentals, they went from being accessory structures to being accessory dwelling units (ADU). A dwelling unit requires ZBA approval, but this was never done. Jared himself has voted on multiple cases for ADU's, presented by our law-abiding citizens, who have come before the board for their approval. Yet they never applied for this themselves. We now know that not only were these illegal ADU's not approved by the ZBA (for the various required variances), but they were being rented to the public with no septic systems (all the details have been copied from their website before it was taken down). Instead, they dug holes in the ground, and as of today we see no NHDES approvals for either of these latrines that were put into use as public rentals. Aside from the multiple International Building Code violations present, The Barnstead Building Code, ZO, IPC also requires a septic system for an ADU, a minimum of 500 SF per dwelling. Neither of these cabins were presented to the ZBA for the proper approval, yet the owner sits on the very board deciding if you can have one. Lastly, when they received approval for the ADU on the barn, a new question arises, did they inform the ZBA they had two others on the property? Doubtful, because if they had they would have needed another variance -as Barnstead only allows one ADU per property. They had two already in play, and now are building a third. One could now also argue that the ZBA approval they have for the one ADU attached to the barn is invalid if the ZBA was not provided with the full details of the other two already on their property.

Back to the STR's (Short Term Rentals). These STR's both required PB approval, selectmen and Health approval. Neither of these "cabins" were ever presented to the PB, yet the owner sits on the very board deciding if you can have one.

During the spring / summer, not long after the incident at the town meeting where I stated I would seek my attorney's advice, I spoke with Nancy, the PB Chair, and explained the complaints coming in from folks in town regarding all these violations of their property. I also explained to her that a prominent businessperson (that most of us know) in this town has said she heard Nancy say something to the effect that the PB will never give RM Abbot the subdivision approval, and that the PB will bury him in engineering until he gives up. She didn't deny it or admit to this statement, she responded with I guess I'll have to be very careful what I say. She then told me she was already aware of the cabins, STR's at Erin's, and she as the Chair would address them directly with Erin. You would have to ask Nancy directly if she ever did, I have nothing to indicate that it ever happened. By this point it was clearly an embarrassment to the PB Board, yet it was still mostly kept out of the public eye. Within days of having this conversation with Nancy, the town received a letter from Erin and Jared's attorney stating in part that I'm not allowed on their property, and they want to call in to their own inspector. They felt I was biased against them. I met with the Selectmen and voluntarily recused myself from inspecting their property, but not from any other building inspector duties outside their property. I assumed someone (possibly Nancy) spoke to Erin and Jared and told them of the complaints I was following up on, and that was when they decided they needed to have me removed as an inspector. Honestly, after the treatment I received at the PB meeting, I wasn't comfortable ever stepping foot on that property again anyway. It was for the better I felt. I even sent a kind text message to Jared explaining I understood and still wished him the very best. Now they are at odds with the new MRI inspector, but they still blame the town for being biased. Can't seem to win.

Phew, now to the last couple layers. Last year (before all the troubles) they applied for a barn permit. WOW! I was pleased. I thought they finally understood they must apply first for a permit. The barn was easily seen from the front of the house, there is no way this one could hide from the public view. He was quickly given a permit for the barn. A year goes by and his permit expired. Our office reached out to them to renew, and they came in with a renewal request, but this time they added an ADU. This one had ZBA approval, and a septic design, which was great. The permit was renewed with the ADU added. I had not been to the property for any inspections by that time, so I cannot clearly state what stage the construction was in, but likely early stages (unless he failed to call in for inspections when required). Now by the time they were all framed, I was already recused as the onsite inspector. So, the town, again at the taxpayers expense, sent out an MRI inspector. He goes out to the property to inspect the barn and confirms the two cabins that were being advertised as rentals. You can find his report under selectmen's supplemental minutes.

When the MRI report came back, he found inconsistencies in the plans. Additionally, during that period they dropped off a plumbing permit for the barn /ADU but on it also said, "light commercial kitchen". This is when we pulled the septic design and saw that it is not only called for an ADU, but also a processing facility of some sort. By this time Erin and Jared had a history of either not pulling permits, or pulling permits for one use, then using them in an entirely different way. This is when we (The MRI inspector, Selectmen and me) realized this was potentially about to get out of control if a commercial kitchen for a new facility of some type was approved without PB site review. Considering all the inconsistencies, it could no longer be ignored. Jared and Erin put us all in the most difficult kind of position. Here we had members of our own boards, who coauthored the very ordinances they themselves didn't adhere to, yet sitting in the place of authority themselves deciding whether others can or cannot. I witnessed the Selectboard struggle with the idea of how to carefully right this wrong, and if they didn't how it would violate the trust and faith that the public had placed in them to be transparent and open. They had to act, and they knew it, but how? By this time the town was forced to hire an attorney, though at a great expense to the taxpayers, they had no choice. Barnstead needed careful representation as Erin and Jared had an attorney, and the narrative seemed to be changing daily and even being skillfully twisted. It was decided not to approve the plumbing permit as long as it had a "commercial kitchen", until such time they could provide a site plan review to the PB with a commercial kitchen or processing facility. A cease and desist was issued by the town council for the cabins and other structures. The Selectmen took a strong stand against the violations, and then made the minutes available to the public to maintain full transparency with the members of our community.

At some point after the MRI inspectors visited their property, they removed the rental cabins from their website, closed their farm stand, and claimed they have discontinued the unapproved uses on their property. Ultimately, because of their written letters to the town of shutting down the illegal uses on the property the Selectmen felt they achieved their goal of getting the property to come into compliance presently, and decided it made no sense to continue expending taxpayer money on legal fees with the new assurances they had in place. This is all provided they don't start up again without the proper approvals. The Selectboard really navigated this tangled web of violations and accusations like professionals with the interest of the town always in mind. If you happen to see any of them on the street, take the time to thank them. The town has also lifted the cease and desist and requirement for site plan review, again, as long as they don't go back to operating without the proper permits and approvals. Hopefully it ends here, we will see.

Whether you are for less regulation or more, whether you like these ordinances or are against them, it is not the point of the issues laid out above. The point is simple. If the people who are authoring these ordinances, putting them out to the public to vote on them, and then sitting in the position of authority to enforce them over you, they themselves must prepare to comply. So, there you have it. Obviously, this is only a synopsis of what all transpired. There is more I left off, merely to save space. In the end, my hope is to set the record straight. Let's hope the mis- information campaign and the rage baiting ends now. There are much better ways we can be expending our resources and energy.