

Summary of the Community Meeting on Short-Term Rentals

Stonington's "Community Conversation" meetings are utilized to offer residents different ways to engage outside of the more traditional format of formal Town Meetings. Too often we see the more formal Town Meetings put people into For and Against segments, and they do not help facilitate civil discourse and can lead to less productive outcomes.

On Monday, June 20, 2022, a "Community Conversation" was held to get input from residents on the issues surrounding Short-Term Rentals (STRs) in Stonington. While this is a challenging issue, community members deserve to be further engaged so that the diverse views on this topic can be better understood by all.

This meeting was the first community engagement on this topic in over five years. To re-engage, Monday's meeting posed five questions to attendees and input was captured through participants' written responses. Attendees were then asked to review all responses, and put a star next to no more than two responses per question. This was a way to gauge which ideas and/or concerns were most prevalent to the attendees.

Stakeholders were encouraged to attend in-person to offer their views, but input was also accepted ahead of the meeting. The summary below is our best attempt to capture the key points raised under different questions from both in-person attendees and those that shared their input ahead of the meeting. **We continue to welcome input ahead of the next meeting**, and that can come in the form of emails, phone calls or in-person meetings. Any input received before July 19th will be summarized, as needed, and added to the below. All input received outside of the Community Conversation is [captured in blue in a separate segment below](#), to help differentiate the input process.

The next meeting will be on July 20th from 5:30pm to 7:30 pm, at the Velvet Mill. For this meeting, we plan to continue to explore new formats; the plan is to have small group discussions and then offer each group a chance to summarize their discussion with the larger group. Depending on the outcome of this meeting, there will likely be further informal and formal meetings on this topic. To share views, ask questions, or provide further input please contact the Director of Economic and Community Development, Susan Cullen, scullen@stonington-ct.gov or First Selectman Danielle Chesebrough at dchesebrough@stonington-ct.gov.

SUMMARY OF INPUT RECEIVED AT THE IN-PERSON MEETING *(items that had two stars or more; or similar items written more than once are represented. Photos of the entire responses are attached)*

Benefits

- Supports local economy, including home cleaners and maintainers, landscapers. Also support for other local businesses, such as restaurants and shops.
- Improvements to property (investments put into landscaping and homes).
- Rental income helps residents stay in their home when on fixed income and/or covers rising costs.
- Offers flexible and affordable stays for people traveling to the region, including families who want to stay together affordably.
- Allows landlords to offer less expensive rental to long-term renter, while offsetting costs by STR unit that can charge more.

Concerns

- No taxes for Town, only State.
- Noise; Parking; Security and Safety Code violations.
- Erodes neighborhood feel.
- May reduce affordable home availability.
- Could reduce property value.
- Landlords unresponsive to neighbors' concerns, no accountability of owners; particularly when the SRT is run by a business.
- Don't do a one sized fit all solution that negatively impacts the STR who are aren't causing problems.

Town Actions

The Town Should . . .

- Restrict "party houses".
- Ensure home capacity limits are not exceeded.
- Enforce current rules on noise and parking.
- Only allow STR in owner occupied dwelling.
- Take an action; don't kick can down the road.
- Make owners number available to adjacent neighbors; provide guidelines on expectations for guests.
- Put a limit on how many STR can be on a block or certain area.
- Track drinking and driving incidents.

The Town Should Not . . .

- Negatively impact STR that have no record of disturbances/no new regulations.
- Require owner-occupancy.
- Ban short term rentals.
- Restrict time on the rental.

What Did We Miss?

- Consider permits as a way to manage safety and security.
- There is a stigma; the vast majority of STR are local, hardworking people who rent their properties respectfully and responsibly.
- Seniors are using STR to stay in their homes, if they can't stay, they might sell to new residents who are loud with lots of cars.
- Require parking be provided by the STR owner for guests.
- Historically, communities like Mystic and the Borough had mixed use homes (boarding house, etc.) and STR are an evolution of this, which allow longtime residents to stay in their homes despite rising taxes.

SUMMARY OF INPUT RECEIVED OUTSIDE OF MEETING

- Introduce a regulation, such as: Short-term rentals are defined as a business (and therefore prohibited in residential zones) if rentals of less than one week occur more than twice in any year.
- Consider introducing a regulation, such as: For a building where the owner is a full-time resident, the owner may rent rooms or apartments in that building for any time period in a year but must provide off-street parking. For a building where the owner is not a full-time resident, the owner may have two sub-lets per year.
- Do not require owner occupancy. This could put people in unsafe situations, particularly the most vulnerable in these types of situations.
- Consider owner-led enforcement to defray administrative costs? E.g. an association of local STR operators that reports to/works with the municipality and provides templates for best management and comms practices / communicates with operators receiving initial complaints - perhaps even providing guidance.
- Consider restricting the number of STRs one can own, rather than taking them away from what you would probably call, “mom and pop” in any other situation.
- Limit the number or percentage of houses in a neighborhood that can become STR's.
- Town should: require off-street parking for owners and guests; prohibit events at STRs (i.e. large parties, food trucks, music with speakers); limit the number of STR's owned by an individual or business; limit the number of days per year that a unit can be occupied by short-term guests. The Town could grandfather in existing STR's, so as to not put local landlords out of business.
- The Town should require that all STR's be registered so that the town can determine just how many currently operate in Stonington. A stiff fine for non-compliance should motivate STR owners to register.
- The Town should require that the owner live on the STR property for most of the year. A six- or three-month minimum rental period for new STR's might discourage individuals and business entities from buying multiple properties for use as STR's.
- With the advent of Airbnb, the short-term housing market has exploded and starter homes are off the market almost as soon as they are listed. They'll likely stay off the long-term housing market for decades unless municipalities take action.
- The cause of housing unaffordability, is not due to short-term rentals. Housing unaffordability in the United States is caused by many things including wage stagnation, rising costs of building materials, and land use policies. As a planner, I'll speak on the land use policies in Stonington and how they inadvertently add to this growing issue. The Town of Stonington should consider a variety of amendments to its Zoning Regulations to address this problem. Firstly, duplexes and accessory dwelling units (ADUs) should be permitted by-right in all zones that allow single-family zoning. Secondly, setbacks and arbitrary sidelines should be reduced or removed to increase the potential density of lots. Thirdly, parking minimums in downtown and denser zones should be removed altogether to further increase potential density that could support affordable housing solutions. A prohibition on short-term rentals may stop some developers from parceling off a larger condominium unit, but it will also displace long-term residents who use these services to pay their ever-increasing property taxes. The better and more equitable solution would be to revise the zoning ordinance to better accommodate a wider range of housing solutions, one where all can benefit.

- An article in Forbes magazine examined “The Airbnb Effect on Housing and Rent.” It concluded that “The Airbnb effect is to some extent remarkably similar to gentrification in that it slowly increases the value of an area to the detriment of the indigenous residents, many of whom are pushed out due to financial constraints.”
- A study published in Harvard Business Review concluded that Airbnb’s, where owners live on the property, don’t have as much of an impact on affordable housing as those with non-resident owners.
- STRs have an added pressure of social media/Airbnb reviews to take special care of their space and now with all the competition, even more care is taken!
- Feel they harm the small residential sections of Town and detract from property values. Outlawing them might not be possible, but they should be regulated and taxed and should meet the same safety standards that hotels are required to maintain.
- Be cautious of adding regulations that will add to the workload of the Stonington Police Department.
- ‘Property managers’ work for the owners and are often not responsive when problems arise.
- Non-Owner Occupied STR should not be allowed in residential neighborhoods. They are commercial rental properties.
- Venue Destination STRs, those with 8 or more occupancies, should not be allowed in residential neighborhoods. These are commercial ventures.
- STRs were once an asset to a community has morphed into a detriment. It is time to rein-in the STR practices and give the residential neighborhoods back their quality of life.
- Short term rentals artificially inflate non-rental properties, who have no intention now or in the future of renting. This imposes an unfair burden of higher property taxes on non-rental properties.
- I currently don’t rent my house out but it was part of the consideration I made when purchasing my home as a future option when I am out of town for work or when going on vacation with my family. The truth is CT is extremely expensive to live and we all deal with it. The town should not interfere with its residence ability to make money and definitely should NOT be putting regulations in place where we would have to pay for permits or pay some additional taxes for this. No permits, no additional taxes, no regulations.
- The homes that I’ve seen purchased for short-term rentals have ALL been updated and look way nicer than they did before. The yards have been cleaned up, the homes have been painted or resided, and all look much nicer.
- Fire concern- Many of these STRs advertise having Fire Pits for the guests to use, gather around and socialize; there are no requirements for the installation, setbacks and use of Fire Pits in the Stonington Building or Zoning regulations. you should consider having guidance for Fire Pits in the town's regulations. Many communities in Connecticut have this in place already.
- We've found Stonington attracts guests looking to return again, which is ideal for us, as we would like to build a model of renting to the same five families every year and along with them, further building social capital in the community. This model of returning guests seems to be true of others we know who rent out their house.
- We have built an extensive ‘What To Do Guide’ for people to eat out, shop, and visit local sites -- supporting and stimulating the local economy with a special focus on small businesses. To further support small businesses, we give guests who stay a bottle of wine from Saltwater Farm Vineyard and have stocked the house with local soaps from the Main Street Soap Emporium to name a few examples.

- Other positive models we have seen include: -Atlanta: a limit of two and you must reside in one -New Bern, NC: a limit of one every 250 feet and it must include off street parking -Colorado Springs: non-owner-occupied units are not permitted in single-family zoning districts, and must be 500 feet from each other in all other districts. Owner-occupied units must be lived in at least 185 days.