

February 9, 2022

Via email to Mr. Ethan Parsons  
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Ms. Carolyn Britt, Chair  
Planning Board  
Town of Ipswich  
25 Green Street  
Ipswich, MA 01938

Re: 55 Waldingfield Road, Traffic Impacts

Dear Chair Britt and Members of the Planning Board:

Having now been present for many hours of your meetings I have a renewed appreciation for the important and hard work that each of you (with little fanfare) puts in on behalf of the citizenry of Ipswich. I hope you are each thanked quite often by townspeople, family, and friends, because you deserve everyone's sincere and hearty appreciation. Please allow me to add my own heartfelt THANK YOU for your efforts.

My wife and I have lived at the end of Waldingfield Road since 1998. It is here that we raised our children, several wonderful dogs, and even a pet rat, if you can believe that! I know this road as well as anyone. I walk it daily for exercise. Early on Ora did a great job reaching out to various groups in the community to engender support for its hoped-for project at 55 Waldingfield. Most all these folks came away mollified, believing Ora to be a savior of sorts for this critical property in the heart of this beautiful area cherished by the entire Town. But as time has passed and more information has come to light, and people have learned more about the true extent of Ora's development (both shorter-term and more importantly what's possible in the future) as well as the unavoidable burden that this will place on roadway/pedestrian safety and neighborhood character, most all have concluded that this is simply not the right development for this relatively tiny parcel in this special part of Town. A huge percentage of the Friends of Waldingfield, if not every person on the list, fits this very description. I would think it perfectly reasonable for a Planning Board member to likewise start out in support of Ora, hear and learn more about its impacts, and conclude that it is simply not the right development for this property based on the Special Permit criteria in the current GE By-law.

The main point of this letter is that I fear for people's lives if this development is allowed to proceed. But before I get to that I want to share my opinion on what else I think is at stake.

I don't think I was the only one who was quite moved at the last Planning Board meeting by the testimony and comments of Professor Robert Yaro. I am far from the expert that he is, but like you, I know something special when I see it. And as someone who has lived at the end of Waldingfield Road for 24 years, I believe that something hugely important is at stake for the town of Ipswich, not to mention the greater North Shore.

Many others agree, which is why hundreds of us are increasingly mobilizing to save it. For what it's worth, some in this same group similarly acted years ago to save the 80+ acre Scott Property on Mill

Road from possibly becoming 30+ lot development, instead of the *now permanent*, beautiful pasture/forest landscape that is there today.

Surely, any rational person would agree that this area (Waldingfield/Appleton corridor) is one of Ipswich's most precious jewels, perhaps surpassed only by Crane's Beach – both once great estates that have been largely left untouched for the benefit and beauty of the town. As such, I hope that as the Town's designated planning leaders, you will continue to handle it with the great care and extreme caution it deserves. Once this area becomes impaired, there is no turning back the clock — something special about Ipswich will have been lost forever. If brave enough, you have the power to save it.

I am not the owner of a large business, but I can understand what motivates Ora's owner. Who wouldn't take pride in and love to have one's business headquarters in this unbelievably beautiful setting? I can also understand the point of view of Ipswich's budget managers. Perhaps by repurposing this property, the town can enjoy a tiny bump in tax revenue as new buildings are constructed and old ones are renovated by the growing business that will move into this historic neighborhood. In the short term, this may boost the property's assessed value and thus the real estate taxes that flow to the town.

But in truth, this tax bump will be so inconsequential as to be hardly noticeable to anyone at all. And it will be gross, not net — there are sure to be offsetting costs as some percentage of Ora's employee base moves here and begins consuming town services, most notably public education. The inclusion of these added costs will likely render this development a net financial loser for the Town overall. Of course, financial calculations remain utterly inconsequential in comparison to the fact that by pursuing this development, the town risks losing something so aesthetically precious as to be essentially priceless.

I think it's also important for the Town to consider that the world has changed. The Covid pandemic has illuminated for all businesses the power of the cloud: remote work is not just possible, it's here for good. Understanding this truth, individual employees around the world, country and state have begun moving away from urbanized office settings to more remote locales with beautiful open space. Consequently, these areas are enjoying rising residential real estate values, which will of course boost tax revenue as these homes are reassessed over time. The notion that a town like Ipswich should try to entice corporations to locate within its borders is in many important ways backward-looking, while likely damaging its future desirability as a place to live (and work remotely). How ironic would it be if Ipswich harmed one of its most attractive open space areas, which for many was the very reason they moved here in the first place, all in the name of trying to add value for the town. Unintended consequences like this are something to really think long and hard about.

In short, if all the Ipswich townspeople were more fully informed about every aspect of what's going on here, would they really support this? I seriously doubt it. Most of us are preoccupied with busy lives. We don't understand or appreciate all the regulatory decisions, laws, or their nuance. We completely (and gladly) rely on elected and appointed leaders, hoping that they are motivated to do the right thing for posterity's sake. For those of us who are increasingly paying attention to this situation, however, we are learning many things we never knew, or perhaps even cared to know.

In the past few months, many of us have come to understand how vastly *different* 55 Waldingfield is from Ipswich's previous Great Estate developments (in acreage, impact on neighborhood character, and traffic). New England Biolabs and Turner Hill each are located on massive, self-contained parcels. 55 Waldingfield on the other hand is quite different, located on a comparatively tiny tract. In fact, the

property is so small that it didn't qualify under the original Great Estate Bylaw. When you combine this truth with the fact that the Waldingfield area is such a special part of the community (recognized as such by the Town in 1974) it is hard for a rational person to conclude anything else other than that detrimental impacts to the neighborhood/area character associated with this project are off the charts when compared to the two other Great Estate developments.

We have also learned that the vote to amend the original bylaw for the benefit of 55 Waldingfield happened at a town meeting in which a mere 2.6% of Ipswich's registered voters voted to make such a monumental change. Very few, if any, of these voters had the reason or ability to look deeply into all aspects of the situation before voting. Yet it should be quite apparent at this point that a very large and growing group of people care deeply, especially as they come to understand the details of the situation more fully. In fact, we have heard from a great many folks who voted affirmatively in favor of amending the Great Estate bylaw (which was presented as a way of helping Ora qualify to move into the Waldingfield neighborhood) that they would have NEVER voted to change the bylaw *had they understood that additional development beyond phases 1A & 1B could (and is indeed very likely to) happen in the future*. In fact, most of the people Ora met with to persuade to their cause in the early days have joined the Friends of Waldingfield effort now that they have a clearer picture of this situation.

To my simple mind the central purpose of having a planning board, and the reason to establish a detailed special permit procedure (rather than simply allowing a development "by right") is to investigate development ideas fully and impartially. Said differently, you are imbued by the people of Ipswich with the power of stewardship. You are the check and balance.

55 Waldingfield is also critically different from past GE developments in that it is not located on a major town artery, but instead on what is in essence an old cattle trail through the woods that eventually was paved over to form a road. Of course, anyone who has traveled Waldingfield knows it is no regular road. It was (and thankfully remains thus far) so remarkably beautiful that in 1974 Ipswich leaders sought its permanent protection by designating it among the town's first *Scenic Byways*.

This, of course, brings me to the main point of this letter – safety.

As a frequent walker/runner on Waldingfield (nearly daily at various points of the year when weather and time permit) I can personally attest to the fact that  $\geq 500$  additional daily trips will make this road incredibly hazardous (while simultaneously causing irreversible harm to neighborhood character). Heck, I think one could cut that number by a factor of 5 or more (i.e., 100 additional trips) and still end up with an incredibly treacherous situation. Waldingfield has already become increasingly dangerous in the past few years as a connector road on two of the town's major traffic arteries (1A Corridor and Topsfield/Mill-Highland Corridor). I suspect some of this is due in large part to commuters hurrying to and from work/play at the other two Great Estate developments mentioned above, which reside on either side of this connector road.

As an adult walker, for my own personal safety, I now only walk against traffic (i.e., on the left side of the street) so I can see what might hit me. This can be quite tricky as there are many blind spots along Waldingfield, which necessitates my quickly switching sides of the road at various intervals. The road is only about a mile long and yet I have to constantly step to the side when cars come. I usually walk at the end of my own workday between 5pm and 6pm. On average I need to literally step off the road 10-15 times in the 15 minutes it takes me to walk the entire street. This is because there simply is not enough

room for two cars and a human being to safely be together on this narrow road. Of course, it is also this same aesthetic (narrow, winding, stone wall & tree-lined, beautiful open spaces) that makes it so special, and why so many come here to run, walk, and bike in the first place.

If 500 cars were added to the mix (and there is no guarantee it will not be way more than this), it would almost certainly make the road intolerably perilous for pedestrians during commuting hours and lunch time, especially with so many now distracted by their electronic gadgets. I am no traffic expert, but I do know the traffic here better than most anyone. By my commonsense approach using my many years of actually walking the road, I suspect that 500 cars would represent (at an absolute minimum) a 6-fold increase in traffic during these periods, but in truth I think the real math could be 2-5 times worse than this.

Regardless of the math, I'd be extremely worried about my elderly mother-in-law, who has a mind of her own to walk regardless of the dangers. I'd worry about parents and baby-sitters strolling babies or walking with children. And most of all, I'd worry about kids on bikes. Simply said, I believe that something terrible is bound to happen if this development (or anything like it) is allowed to proceed.

Of course, none of the above is even being debated at this point. The applicant's own hired expert has testified that to neighbors and pedestrians, the increase in traffic will be quite dramatic. This, of course, is why the applicant has proposed so many different mitigation ideas. From my own memory, they (so far) include: 1) a non-binding promise that because of Covid they now will *not* really need to come to the office as much; 2) another non-binding promise that they will shrink the entire project down from their initial hopes and dreams; 3) the suggestion that most employees will now *not* drive to the office complex and park in the initially proposed large underground parking garage (which will be scrapped for now), but will instead park offsite and take shuttle buses; 4) the suggestion that many employees will now take the train to work and carry their bikes and ride these bikes from the train station (in the snow?) to the office; 5) the suggestion that the Town place speed bumps on this bucolic and historically designated scenic road; 6) the suggestion that the Town place flashing electronic "slow down" signs on the road.

The way I see it, the applicant has essentially admitted what a growing body of concerned citizens has understood for a while: the idea of putting a corporate headquarters and its associated traffic impacts on Waldingfield Road is simply a terrible idea. The recent flurry of mitigation ideas from the applicant seems like spaghetti thrown at a wall to see if anything sticks. Of course, none of it does; in fact, to an informed, impartial mind these suggestions sound simultaneously ridiculous and desperate.

Nobody, including me, has any ill will toward the folks at Ora or their representatives. They have spent a lot of their own time and money on this. They want an elegant, beautiful workspace. There is nothing wrong with that. Similarly, there should be no ill will toward the Town, which has also spent much time and effort trying to find ways for this particular development to succeed, surely with only the best intentions. The conservation-minded have also spent a lot of their own time and money on this and much like the Town itself, these folks only have the very best long-term intentions. We are all human beings. We are prone to emotion when things of this gravity are on the line - things we care deeply about and have spent a lot of time and money on. We will have disagreements, but let's all remember that none of us are really all that different. We are, each of us, honest people with the very best intentions.

Having said that, I think what's tricky here is the fact that it is very difficult for human beings — particularly when acting in groups — to change their minds once they have publicly supported something, no matter how convincing the evidence presented. The Town's decision to amend the GE bylaw specifically so Ora could move into one of our town's most historic and beautiful areas is a pretty significant public commitment. But now that we have more details, it has become clear that the benefits of this specific project at this specific location are no longer greater than the detriments. Indeed, gathering more information and reacting accordingly is exactly how the public hearing and special permit application process is *supposed* to work. While the external pressure to approve this project is presumably tremendous, the planning board can and should contemplate all the facts and cast a vote solely on the merits as it sees them.

Thank you so much for hearing me out. I hope my comments have been useful to you in some way. And please know that they come purely from a place solely concerned with what's best for the community long after I am gone. I think the outcome here is far more important than its impact on anyone alive today. This is about the people that come after us all.

And finally, thank you so much for all that you do. I know it's thankless, albeit incredibly tough work. Please also know that everyone's thoughts are with you as you work through this complicated and politically charged situation...and in the end listen to only what's in your own heart and mind.

Sincerely yours,

Mark Massey  
920 Highland Street

*"When my information changes, I alter my conclusions. What do you do, sir?"*  
-John Maynard Keynes