

February 14, 2022

Via email to Mr. Ethan Parsons

ethanp@ipswichma.gov

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:

Years ago, when 55 Waldingfield first went on the market, I was concerned. I, like many others in the area, dreamed that a wealthy equestrian would purchase the property and minimize any changes. I watched the sale price slowly drop. Not surprising. It is a large property that requires a hefty maintenance budget.

When I learned of Ora's intent to buy the property, I was intrigued and tried to understand their planned use. At first, I applauded them. My initial understanding was that Ora wanted to expand their footprint and saw this project as an opportunity to try to assist a community and provide a nice place for their employees to convene. I was able to relate to this concept, because of my time working at Merck in NJ in the 90's. Merck owned a property in Branchburg, NJ, a site that was conveniently located to their larger research and manufacturing facilities in Westpoint, PA and Rahway, NJ. The Branchburg site included a mansion/farm that was re-purposed as a retreat/small conference center, as well as a place where horses were kept that were used to produce anti-sera to snake and spider venom. The property was supported by a full-time staff that took care of the grounds and there was even a full-time chef. It was a place for Merck employees to use for retreats or team building picnics and only 20 people at a time could attend. There were 10 bedrooms in the mansion for use during longer term retreats. It was strictly controlled and there was never a crowd there. Employees had to reserve passes to utilize the facility weeks in advance. I only went there once, but it was memorable. Peaceful. Bucolic. I even got to pet one of the anti-venom horses. My team had a nice picnic outside and a very productive brainstorming session around our cancer research activities.

And I thought – this is perfect for 55 Waldingfield and Ipswich.

But over time, it became more and more apparent to me that Ora had bigger plans for 55 Waldingfield. The phases of expansion and increased number of employees on site made me flip my opinion of Ora's plans and I rapidly lost trust in the company. I, like many other residents of Ipswich, became increasingly concerned.

I believe that the Great Estates Preservation Bylaw is a good regulation – but Waldingfield is the wrong location for the project that Ora now proposes. I agree with the letters submitted to the Planning Board from Mary Milgrew and John Lichten, and the very recent one from Crocker Snow. As mentioned previously: I, too, was cautiously optimistic about Ora's intentions. I was somewhat convinced that the community of Ipswich could work with Ora and compromise in such a way that would not drastically affect those of us who enjoy Waldingfield Road. But over the past several months, I have become increasingly distrustful of Ora and alarmed about the likely changes that will be imposed on the residents of Ipswich. Please heed the concerns of the Ipswich residents in your decision making.

Oh, by the way – in 2007, Merck decided it needed to sell the Branchburg property for a profit and it challenged the town's zoning ordinance. The township had been increasingly concerned about preserving its rural character and had passed a zoning ordinance around a Resource Conservation District that included the Merck property. The township's zoning of Merck's 206 acre property, which was the largest undeveloped tract of land in Branchburg, allowed one home for every 6 acres. Merck argued for one home per acre, claiming that the town's zoning bylaws were "clearly arbitrary, capricious, and unreasonable." Merck filed suit, the case went to court and it was ruled in favor of Merck. The township appealed and the case went back to court. Finally, in 2020, the appellate court ruled in favor of Branchburg, stating that the township had presented "plausible" and "reasonable" reasons for the zoning.

Many townspeople have expressed concern about the long-term future of 55 Waldingfield, should Ora be granted to move forward. They should be concerned. Once a corporation owns the land, it will do what corporations always do: maximize profits.

Sincerely,

Anne Burkhardt