

John and Andrea Beveridge
956 Highland Street
South Hamilton, MA 01982

June 15, 2022

Ms. Tammy Jones, Chair
Select Board
Town of Ipswich
25 Green Street
Ipswich, MA 01938

Ms. Carolyn Britt, Chair
Planning Board

Re: 55 Waldingfield Road, GEPB Application by ORA Corporation

Dear Chair Jones, Chair Britt and Members of the Planning Board:

We appreciate the opportunity to provide input on how the proposed project directly impacts us, our neighborhood, and the community. Please consider the following comments largely as a follow-up from the most recent Planning Board meeting on June 9, 2022.

Andrea and I live at 956 Highland Street at the end of Waldingfield Road. We are both walkers, occasional bike riders, and frequently travel Waldingfield Road by car. As 30-year residents (and myself for over 70 years), we deeply value the character of the neighborhood and the exquisite charm of Waldingfield road. We continue to live here because of the rural character and safety of the neighborhood and our respectful neighbors. We want it preserved for all. We agree wholeheartedly with Robert Yaro's points as to the beauty and historic value of Waldingfield Road and the critical importance of preserving it.

Our concerns pertain to the loss of residential zoning for the property, the nature and extent of increased traffic, the logistics of providing operational support for the ORA facilities, and the risks and unintended consequences of the project.

Change from Residential to Commercial Status

Our immediate concern about the 55 Waldingfield project rests on the change in zoning status from residential (single family dwelling) to commercial. For neighborhood families, the change is from living and owning property in a residentially zoned area to one that has a mix of residential and commercial. One hallmark of zoning is to protect residential areas from the impact of commercial businesses. This change should not be treated lightly. It requires having a detailed, working understanding of exactly the kind of business and the nature and types of activities that will be performed on the property. Once changed, there is no going back and we cannot replace what is lost.

Commercial Operations, 24/7

By way of ORA's own admission and special permit filing, the commercial property will essentially be a 24/7 operation with the equivalent of an on-site hotel, dining, and work facility. Although employees will need to use ORA's scheduling software, it appears that they come and go by their own accord. While a 24/7 operation could be permitted within the provisions of the Great Estate Preservation Bylaw, having a hotel and hotel parking adjacent to Waldingfield Road is out of character to the residential setting which is another central tenant of the application evaluation criteria. We cannot fathom how a hotel, particularly at this roadside location, is compatible with the rural setting.

Moreover, having a 24/7 business operation within a neighborhood where ORA's employees can also come and go at any time -- not to mention possible deliveries outside of normal business hours -- is significantly different from the norm of a residential neighborhood. Furthermore, ORA has noted that they want employees and guests to have a good time. Does this mean day-time and evening events, during the work week or weekends, with outdoor music, alcohol, or whatever? We neighbors have no idea.

Ora Inc. Operations at 55 Waldingfield Road

It is absolutely important to have a working understanding of the nature and extent of ORA's operations. Understanding the tasks and activities that ORA employees (and guests for that matter) will be performing provides a basis for several areas of inquiry. ORA's explanation of the use of the location, which should have come directly from ORA, lacked detail. The example of people coming to the corporate campus for a 10:00 am meeting and afterwards going for a walk, or having a smoothie at the cafe, was nonsensical. At one point, it seemed that the project manager said that ORA would not be doing research. However, when asked for clarification of "what would a day be like" for ORA employees, the project manager said they would be doing collaborative research. What does the research require besides the Internet and a laptop (any labs, testing, additional technology, etc.)?

Remote Operations

Do not be fooled by the assumption that the "new norm" of remote operations is the sole pretext for future business operations. We have observed that some businesses are experiencing pressure for increased on-site operations. There is a wide range of businesses that are desperate for employees, many of whom are needed for on-site operations.

We have heard a lot from ORA as to their commitment to remote operations. Ultimately, increases or decreases in staffing levels are determined by management and operational requirements. They do not remain static. Once ensconced at 55 Waldingfield, we may find that ORA's strategic and operational growth will necessitate expansion. And if ORA does not stay, the commercial status and all its trimmings remain with the property.

With all the discussion about remote operations, is Waldingfield Road the employees' new remote location, and for what number of employees? If 90 car spaces implies an upper bound of 90 on-site employees, why is there some kind of agreement with Ebsco for 30 additional spaces, not to mention a van to pick up and discharge other employees and guests that come by train?

Traffic Impact

One or both of us walk Waldingfield Road several times a week and have done so for years. The adverse impact to the safety and the character of the neighborhood resulting from increased traffic should not be taken lightly. We are concerned not only about the projected traffic increase, but the nature of the traffic, especially by large vehicles during extended construction periods and ongoing delivery vehicles. Most assuredly, we are deeply concerned for our safety and the safety of fellow walkers, cyclists and equestrians with a further increase in traffic.

In earlier meetings of the Planning Board we heard of a "significant increase" in traffic. That was followed by an apparent change in business strategy requiring less people, and therefore less cars. At a recent Design Review Board meeting, we appear to be at the stage where we hear -- don't worry, it will only be one car each minute. Commuters tend to arrive and leave in clusters of vehicles, even for collaborative meetings. Even though some employees may vary their start and ending times, that latitude is usually not afforded to support staff. Moreover, not all employees are likely to stay on site throughout the day.

A number of suggestions have been presented to supposedly mitigate the increased traffic. For example, speed bumps, whether abrupt or gentle slopes, will likely slow traffic, but certainly do not decrease it.

As a footnote, not that many years ago, Appleton Farms proposed having a location on Goodhue Street where people could pick up farm produce. There was a strong push back from the neighbors. Not because they were against farm fresh food, but rather because of the potential adverse impact of the increased traffic on a country lane. The Trustees shifted to another location where the bulk of traffic would be on a state roadway. Though not exactly the same, there are some similar concerns with respect to 55 Waldingfield.

Public Discussion

We believe physical and virtual attendance is critical for these Planning Board meetings. We have listened carefully to the presentations and arguments raised by all parties. We thought that there were some good public inputs at the June 9th meeting, such as the issue regarding water usage and an array of well-articulated comments. It is unfortunate that some of these good comments (and points raised by many excellent letters) are not discussion topics and go unanswered. While ORA has provided details on efforts to conserve and reuse water, there has been little mention of specific details on water usage to support a significant array of requirements.

From a different perspective, we suspect that the person who had some twenty years of experience on federal permits would have agreed on the importance of detailed information, independent data verification, and adequate assessment of risk to support the review process. We hope that the suggestion for a special permit approval is not an off ramp for the board. A permit with restrictions is obviously acceptable to ORA, especially if the restrictions are difficult to enforce and are not subject to independent assessment. It felt like a plant.

Presentation Material

As a matter of form, ORA's submission of a 100+-page document a few days before the June 9th Planning Board meeting containing a host of materials but lacking an index and page numbers makes it harder for readers to navigate and study the materials. This simple administrative omission seems purposeful. In addition, engineering documents should also contain version numbers to assist one in tracking changes.

We believe the review process lacks independent data verification and adequate assessment of risk to the neighborhood and the community. We feel that the application should not be approved.

Sincerely,

John and Andrea Beveridge