

# Wineries at center of debate on revising Somers zoning rules

By Erika Purdy

epurdy@journalinquirer.com

**SOMERS** — Discussion over a proposal to permit farm wineries, breweries, and distilleries in town dominated the conversation at the Zoning Commission public hearing on its proposed update of its regulations.

The commission plans to meet next Wednesday, March 10, to revise the proposed regulations, then present them to the public for more feedback at a later date.

During the hearing last month, several people spoke specifically about local couple Mark and Karen Murdoch's desire to open a farm winery on their property at Worthington Pond, despite Chairwoman Jill Conklin's admonition that the hearing was on the proposed regulations, not a specific application.

Commission member Karl Walton said the proposed regulation on wineries, breweries, and distilleries was drafted in line with the town's 2004 plan of conservation and development. He summarized the plan by saying that "people in town were interested in trying to encourage uses that kept open spaces open and let us keep our rural characteristics."

Some members of the public, including Gregory Altieri and Kyle Hughes, backed the proposed regulations, saying a winery would be a beneficial addition to the town.

Altieri said the regulations should include minimal restrictions to allow for "creative freedom for the sake of ultimate hospitality" for the owner. He said a farm winery would be an important addition to the cultural and artistic needs of Somers, adding that its positives far outweigh its negatives.

Hughes said the regulation would allow the town to transform unused properties. He mentioned Powder Hollow Brewery in the Hazardville section of Enfield, which he said took "old buildings that just sat there and turned them into small local community places."

But other speakers, including Judy Schober and Ken Prior,

## ZONING DEBATE

**ISSUE:** Revision of zoning regulations would allow farm wineries, breweries, and distilleries with a special-use permit.

**STATUS:** Zoning Commission will revise the draft and schedule another public hearing.

opposed the regulation.

Schober said she would love to visit a winery but said many Somers roads are winding and not designed for the density of traffic that maybe might come from a development.

"I'm a little bit worried about being able to peacefully enjoy our property the way that we thought it would be," Schober said. She said the town wants to be business friendly but suggested that the commission needs to look at all the people affected and their understanding of what the town was before they moved in.

Prior opposed the entire regulation, saying it would create an enforcement nightmare to the detriment of neighbors. He said farm wineries are commercial uses not appropriate for residential zones, adding that he hadn't heard a farmer endorse the regulation, only an engineer and a business owner.

Mark Murdoch said the town came to him and his wife about opening a winery in town, which prompted Prior to question the ethics of such a discussion.

"I find it interesting that town employees are making promises regarding zoning regulation changes to businesses and real estate developers," Prior said in an email to the Journal Inquirer. "Not exactly transparent or ethical."

In response, First Selectman C.G. "Bud" Knorr said: "The Murdochs approached me and inquired if there was available land for sale in Somers that would be suitable for a proposed winery they were thinking of establishing. I suggested that they contact Dan Rouiler since I was aware that Worthington Pond was on the market. That was the extent of my involvement."

JI

3/4/21

\*

\*