

Rec'd 2/3/2020  
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Somers Zoning Commission  
Hillsdale College Special Use Permit

February 3, 2020

# Table of Contents

The following represents public documents which have described the Hillsdale proposal on Hall Hill Road as "educational" center vs. a "religious institution" as currently being proposed.

- 1) Somers Economic Development Commission Meeting Minutes of 1/7/19.
- 2) Journal Inquirer Article dated 2/8/19
- 3) Hillsdale Collegian (Hillsdale College Paper) dated 2/21/19
- 4) Journal Inquirer Article dated 2/25/19
- 5) Journal Inquirer Article dated 5/6/19
- 6) Journal Inquirer Article dated 4/29/19
- 7) Journal Inquirer Article dated 5/13/19
- 8) "A Friendly Proposal" was taken from a website established by the Blake's outlining the proposed plans for the Hall Hill Road location which has been since taken down. See attached Journal Inquirer article dated 5/13/19 which references the websites and Facebook page.

(1)

## Somers Economic Development Commission Meeting Minutes of 1/7/2019

1. Call to Order: Chairman Cheney called the meeting to order at 7:04 P.M. EDC members present: Rick Cheney, Vicki Clark, Pamela Belisle and David Marti. Guest Included: Paul Salva, Tim Keeney, and Wayne Dumas.
2. Minutes: Ms. Belisle made a motion to accept the minutes of the 9/10/18 meeting. Ms. Clark seconded the motion and the motion passed 4-0.
3. Correspondence: No new correspondence.
4. Old Business
  - a) Directory App/Town Website Training  
No action taken
  - a. EDC Marketing Materials Proposal/Pricing: Mr. Marti presented a pamphlet. Ms. Clark and Ms. Belisle suggested some edits which Mr. Marti will make. No action taken at this point.
  - b. Social Media Status Report: No action taken.
  - c. 2019 Business Directory Progress Report: will continue working on selling advertisements.
  - d. Strategic Town Development
    - i. Mill Site : Mr. Keeney reported that a building proposal was submitted by a Pennsylvania firm which would include approximately 60 apartments and 22,000 sq. ft. of retail space. Further, no market analysis has been completed, but there is belief that there is a demand for this. Targeted at young and downsizing. 80% of the units would be affordable housing. Parking and traffic would be routed through Quality Ave.  
As this was for informational purpose – no action was taken
    - ii. Business Questionnaire programing project: No progress has been made as Mr. Ritacco is no longer on the EDC. No action was taken.
  - e. Communication Seminar Project : Ms. Clark indicated she has been working on this with Ms. Belisle and that the seminar has been scheduled for January 28, 2019 at Joanna's Café at 6:00PM. There is a fee of \$10 or an ad in the directory. Presentation will be by Steve Pocari and will focus on communication skills. There will also be a networking element to the evening. Advertising is on Face Book, but not a lot of committed yet. Will continue to promote on Face Book. Mr. Marti will create some flyers and they will be displayed around town.
2. New Business
  - a. New Town Business Report: Ms. Clark reported no new business in town.
    - i. Hillsdale College – Paul Salva, Tim Keeney, and Wayne Dumas

reported that Presley and Helen Blake want to reacquire the Monticello and donate it along with their daughter's house and their house (all adjoining) to Hillsdale College. To be named the Presley and Helen Blake Center for Business, Ethics and Entrepreneurship. Fact finding 2-day trip to Hillsdale College was taken by Vicki Clark, Paul Salva, Tim Keeney, Wayne Dumas and Brian Czapla. Impact on town would be loss of tax revenue, as this is a non-profit. The space would be used for a series of annual events, focusing on professional development, continued education, retreats and seminars. Events estimated attendance would 50-75 ppl, 15-20 events per year.

Jobs for our community – maintain property.

Project will need "special use" permit from Zoning Board

Possible give – backs to Somers: Prison programs, Pre-K early reading programs.

Group will be presenting to the Zoning Board in March or April.

b. 2019 Meeting Schedule and Annual Report:

2019 Meeting calendar (see attached). A motion to accept the schedule was made by Ms. Belisle and seconded by Ms. Clark. Motion carried 4-0.

3. Chairman's Comments: Next meeting will be on Monday, February 4<sup>th</sup>.

4. Adjournment: A motion to adjourn the EDC meeting was made by Ms. Clark and seconded by Ms. Belisle. The motion carried 4-0 and the meeting was adjourned at 9:12 PM.

Respectfully submitted,  
Pamela Belisle

*Minutes are not official until approved at a subsequent meeting.*

EXCLUSIVE

TOP STORY

# New use for Monticello? Co-founder of Friendly's, wife propose satellite college in Somers

By Jackie Nappo  
and Matthew P. Knox Journal Inquirer  
Feb 8, 2019



Stanley Blake and his wife, Helen, pose in front of their then-nearly completed Monticello replica in September 2014 in Somers. (Jim Michaud / Journal Inquirer)

JIM MICHAUD



college-affiliated nonprofit educational and business center in their name in town through donations of their 77-acre estate, their daughter's home, and the buyback of the replica Monticello mansion they built in 2014 was brought before the Economic Development Commission at a recent meeting.

The commission listened to a presentation about the Blakes' idea on Jan. 7.

The Blakes want to call the site "The Prestley and Helen Blake Center for Business, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship" and it would be affiliated with Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan, which would operate it as a satellite campus.

In order to make the Blakes' idea a reality several things have to happen, such as the town's Zoning Commission would have to approve a zone change for Hall Hill Road where the adjoining three properties are located, changing it from residential to special use.

Minutes from the EDC's Jan. 7 meeting indicate that the Blakes's plan could go before the Zoning Commission as early as March.

Helen Blake said Thursday that the couple's idea is to have Hillsdale College use the site for events such as professional development, continued education, retreats and seminars.

A crucial part of the plan is to have Hillsdale College buy back the multimillion-dollar replica of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello mansion that the Blakes had built on 10 acres at 732 Hall Hill Road in 2014 so it could be the centerpiece of the educational and business center. The property is adjoining to the Blakes' \$1.5 million 77-acre estate at 700 Hall Hill Road.

In 2016, the replica Monticello was sold at auction to Springfield eye doctor John Papale and his wife, Lynn, for \$2.1 million.

John Papale could not be reached for comment on Thursday, but Helen Blake said he is "on board" with Hillsdale College acquiring the Monticello property. He has been a wonderful steward of the house in the years since he purchased it, she said.

Timothy R. E. Keeney, a lawyer and retired probate judge who lives in Somers, said Thursday that he was approached by S. Prestley Blake last October to ask for his professional assistance in buying back his replica Monticello.

He asked Keeney to help him get the word out about the idea for the educational and business center, and to assist him in obtaining a special use permit for the property from the Zoning Commission.

"The problem is there have been a lot of rumors about the project," Keeney said.

He said some concerns people have brought to him are that the Blakes' plan would change the physical makeup of the property or that it would increase traffic.

However, the Blakes want Hillsdale College to acquire Monticello so that the physical makeup of the property can be maintained after they die.

Also, Keeney said that due to the nature of the events that would be held at the property, which would be educational and professional development seminars, there will be little impact on traffic.

### **Fact-finding trip**

Keeney, along with School Superintendent Brian Czapla, Paul Salva, Walter Dumas, and EDC member Victoria Clark visited Hillsdale College on a "fact finding" trip in December to hear the college officials' vision for the property. Hillsdale College funded the trip for the group, which also included the Blakes.

Keeney indicated that Czapla said from the beginning that he wouldn't take a position on the Blakes' plan, but that he wanted to see what the possibility of having such an educational center in town could mean for the school system. Czapla could not be reached for comment.

First Selectman C.G. "Bud" Knorr on Thursday pointed out that residents are also concerned about the tax revenue that would be lost from donating such a large piece of property to a nonprofit.

EDC Chairman Richard Cheney said that at the commission's meeting on Feb. 4, it was mentioned that Hillsdale College officials would come to a Zoning Commission meeting in March to discuss their vision for the property.



in discussions with the Blakes. The Blakes approached the college with the intention of not just preserving their estate and the replica Monticello, but creating a center for educational outreach on topics like America's founding principles of liberty, limited government under the constitution, entrepreneurship, and property rights, Davis said.

"Hillsdale is already heavily involved in educational outreach, including through its Kirby Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C. The idea of a satellite campus in Connecticut is a perfect fit with Hillsdale's mission," Davis said.

According to Helen Blake, the idea to donate their estate and to help Hillsdale acquire the Monticello property came about after she and her husband did some "soul searching."

They're not getting any younger — she's 87 and her husband is 104 — and have been thinking about the future of the properties, she said. As part of their life's work, they want to see the replica Monticello preserved in its current state and not someday turned into a housing development, she said.

At that point, she sent a letter to Hillsdale's president, inviting him to visit the property.

She has attended several of the college's seminars, which are held all over the country, and admires its commitment to rigorous education and independence from the government.

Blake said that she likes how Hillsdale College teaches its students using original documents, instead of textbooks whose author could have a political agenda.

Helen Blake said that she thinks the sprawling property, with its peaceful atmosphere, would be perfect for an educational center. Also, it's in a good location, she said. There are hotels nearby, and the property is only a 25-minute drive from Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks.

## **New England foothold**

A location in Connecticut would give the college a foothold in New England to host seminars and other events, she said.

The mansion that the Blakes reside in now would go to the college as well, but only after they die, Helen Blake said. She said it hasn't been decided yet when her daughter's house, also nearby, would be donated.

Resident Jerry Tarbox, who lives nearby on Meadowbrook Road and has a direct view of Monticello from his front door, wonders what will happen if the property's zoning is changed and Hillsdale College takes over.



In a letter he sent to Knorr and the Zoning Commission, Tarbox wrote that, "I am very concerned as to the impact to this residential area from a quality of life perspective including increasing traffic, adequate parking, and changing the nature of this area of Somers."

Tarbox also said that he was concerned to find, when speaking with his neighbors several days ago, that a majority of them didn't know about the plan.

According to the minutes of the EDC's Jan. 7 meeting, the events to be held on the property would attract an estimated attendance of 50 to 75 people and there would be 15 to 20 events per year.

The minutes also say that while the impact of the Blakes' plan on the town would be the loss of tax revenue, it would also create jobs for the community and result in having the property maintained. The minutes also say that possible give backs to the town would be "prison programs" and pre-kindergarten reading programs.

Commission supports mill, college projects in Somers

Hillsdale College official's speech showcases conservative stance

Somers first selectman stays neutral on Hillsdale proposal

# Friendly's co-founder seeks to donate Monticello replica to Hillsdale

NICOLE AULT FEBRUARY 21, 2019

Prestley and Helen Blake hope to donate property in Connecticut that includes a replica of Monticello to Hillsdale College. Wayne Dumas | Courtesy

Prestley Blake, the 104-year-old co-founder of Friendly's restaurant chain, brims daily with new ideas, his lawyer said — and one of his latest is to give 90 acres of property, including a replica of Monticello, to Hillsdale College to use as an educational center.

Months later, that idea is coming closer to fruition, pending mostly on zoning-commission approval in Somers, Connecticut, where the property is. Blake and his wife, Helen, plan to donate the property and some funds for its operation to the college, according to their attorney, Tim Keeney.

The Blakes approached the college in August with the idea. Since then, college officials and members of the Somers community have exchanged visits and decided to move forward with the project.

"It's something the Blakes identify with directly, and therefore they feel very good about working with Hillsdale. It's an alignment of interests," Keeney said, noting the Blakes' appreciation for the college's values.

Mike Harner, chief of staff for the Hillsdale College president's office, said the college would likely use the property to run programs for about 50 to 75 people each throughout the year, mostly in the summer. The educational center would fit well with the college's mission and goals, he said.

"It would go along with the things that we do at the school. Hostels, CCAs, online courses, Imprimis, all those things are methods of communicating the things that the college exists to support. Having a center, which is the idea for the Blake property, would allow us to do those things for various size groups in various ways," he said.

He said the college would like to use the facilities for lectures and events, as well as trainings for local students and educators. Its location in Connecticut puts it in the proximity of a good number of friends of the college, he added.

Some local residents do have concerns about the change, and the college is looking to address them, Harner said.

"We want to be good neighbors," Harner said.

Some residents of Somers — which has a population just a little larger than Hillsdale's 8,000 — are worried about traffic and changes in property use, Keeney said. The Journal Inquirer, a local newspaper, reported that one neighbor expressed concern about "increasing traffic, adequate parking, and changing the nature of this area of Somers."

But Keeney said traffic won't prove much of an issue because of the property's location, and the college will maintain or improve the property by



using it.

"The benefits to the neighbors is the maintenance of the property and the conservation of the land," Keeney said, noting that the Blakes have always tried to use their property generously, allowing local residents to use its trails. Harner said the college would continue to keep the property open for locals.

Most concerning to Somers residents is the loss of tax revenue that would result from the property becoming a non-profit educational center: "That's the elephant in the room," Keeney said.

Keeney estimated that the real-estate tax from the Blakes' property currently brings in \$80,000 to \$90,000 annually for the town. It is a very small percentage of the town budget, though, he said.

Harner said the college is aware of the community's concerns about the tax revenue and is working with Somers members to address them, though the college's presence itself may address some of those concerns. Keeney pointed out that the educational center may bring in business revenue for hotels and restaurants as people come from out of town to visit.

Somers itself is located 25 minutes from an international airport and within an hour's drive of Hartford, Connecticut, and Springfield, Massachusetts. It's only three hours from New York City. The town hosts a lacrosse tournament every year and is known for its horse farming, according to Paul Salva, a Somers pulmonologist and president of the town's education foundation.

"By New England standards, it's remarkably beautiful," Salva said.

Salva, who visited Hillsdale College along with Keeney, the Blakes, and three other Somers residents in December, said he's "enthusiastic" about the prospect of the educational center.

"It would set us apart regionally," he said. "It would bring all the good of a college campus without the worries of an undergraduate campus. It would just raise the profile of the town in a positive way tremendously."

He said the trip to Hillsdale in December was encouraging: "We've seen Hillsdale is a very good neighbor to its community, which says something."

The Monticello replica, a sized-to-scale model of Thomas Jefferson's home completed in 2014, is "pretty amazing," according to Keeney: Its bricks came from the same source as those in the real Monticello, and the Blakes flew down to Virginia to get the plans for the original. The Blakes' property also includes a personal home that Prestley Blake built in 1974, and another house built for his daughter, according to Keeney.

Prestley Blake sold the Monticello building to a local eye doctor a few years ago, but the current owner is "very supportive" of the new plan, and a verbal deal is in place, Keeney said.

The next step is a zoning meeting in Somers in April. The zoning commission has to grant a specialty-use permit for the property to change its purpose from residential to educational, Keeney said. For the next few weeks, the college is working on communicating with the community and being transparent about its plans, Harner said.

“The neighbors very much need to understand what it is that Hillsdale can do and is planning on doing,” Keeney said.

Harner said the college is hopeful that the Blakes’ idea will become reality before long.

“I would say the college is very optimistic for the prospects of the gift and to keep the Blakes’ legacy alive through the teaching that the college does,” he said.

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# Local officials not so much worried about Hillsdale's political ideals; Somers focused on zoning issues, tax impact

By Jackie Nappo  
jnappo@journalinquirer.com  
Feb 25, 2019

SOMERS — Though Hillsdale College has a reputation as a politically conservative institution, town officials on both sides of the aisle are more concerned about how the potential college-affiliated business and education center would fit into local zoning regulations, as well as the potential loss of tax revenue, than its political leaning.

Hillsdale College could become part of the fabric of the local community thanks to an idea by S. Prestley Blake, co-founder of the Friendly's restaurant chain, and his wife Helen, that was presented at a Jan. 7 Economic Development Commission meeting.

The Blakes hope to create a college-affiliated nonprofit educational and business center in their name in town through donations of their 77-acre estate, their daughter's home, and the buyback of the replica Monticello mansion they built in 2014.

approve a zone change for Hall Hill Road where the adjoining three properties are located, changing it from residential to special use.

The Monticello mansion, in conjunction with Hillsdale College, would be named the Prestley and Helen Blake Center for Business, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship, and would host educational seminars and professional development events.

According to the Washington Post, Hillsdale is one of a handful of four-year colleges in the country that declines all federal funding, even going so far as to refuse to participate in federal student aid programs.

The decision not to accept any federal funding, directly or indirectly, came from the school's refusal to provide federal officials with an account of its students by race in the 1970s, the Post wrote.

The college's resistance led to a lengthy legal battle, which culminated in a Supreme Court ruling against the school. Rather than complying with the ruling, which the school viewed as unconstitutional, Hillsdale stopped allowing students to use federal aid to pay for their education.

This resolution to maintain independence from the federal government explains why the small school in rural Michigan draws such support from political conservatives, the Washington Post story says.

Additionally, Hillsdale asks entering freshman to sign an honor code, which can be found on the school's website. The code emphasizes the idea that through education, students will rise to "self-government," which is later described as calling for "active cultivation of intellectual and moral excellence and humility before our Creator."

The code goes on to describe life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as natural rights, and calls them "gifts from God."

At this stage, town officials are unsure of how the politics of the institution could affect the community.

"I'd like to have them talk to us and tell us what that's all about," said Selectwoman Kathleen Devlin, a Democrat, who added that she isn't sure what Hillsdale's conservatism might imply for the town.

Devlin went on to say that her opinion on the college opening a satellite campus in Somers is reliant on what the Zoning Commission decides about the properties on Hall Hill Road, and that until the zoning concerns are ironed out she isn't thinking about the institution's politics.

Selectman Timothy Potrikus, another Democrat, expressed a similar unsure sentiment about how Hillsdale's political leaning might impact the community. He said he is interested in the perspective of the school system.

Somers, it's not of value," he said.

Potrikus emphasized the importance of meeting the zoning guidelines for the area, and said that although property owners should be able to decide what to do with their property, they have to comply with zoning regulations.

"There's no easy answer," he said.

When asked about Hillsdale's conservatism, Helen Blake pointed out that Hillsdale College was the first American college to prohibit discrimination, including on the basis of race, religion, and sex.

For Helen Blake, a point of interest about the school is its commitment to teaching from original documents — like the U.S. Constitution — instead of textbooks.

"You're not being taught by somebody's opinion," she said. "You have the opportunity to make your own judgments, and that's the best we can do, is learn how to think and learn how to read what the original point was."

First Selectman C.G. "Bud" Knorr, a Republican, is supportive of teaching constitutional principles, and said he isn't concerned about where Hillsdale falls on the political spectrum.

Knorr, however, emphasized that many things need to transpire before a satellite campus becomes a reality, including hearing the concerns of the abutters of the property and examining the implication of the potential lost tax revenue.

Democratic Town Committee members discussed the possibility of the satellite campus at their recent meeting Tuesday night.

"There was some level of familiarity with the proposal, but mostly questions to be answered and concern for the town's tax base," said Town Chairman David Pinney.

Pinney said members were concerned about what kind of use, subsequent activities, and construction might take place on the property. They also expressed concerns about the Monticello mansion coming off the tax rolls.

"If in the course of events it's being permitted for use there, the political nature of the folks who occupy the site is not necessarily our area to question," he said.



college coming to Somers.

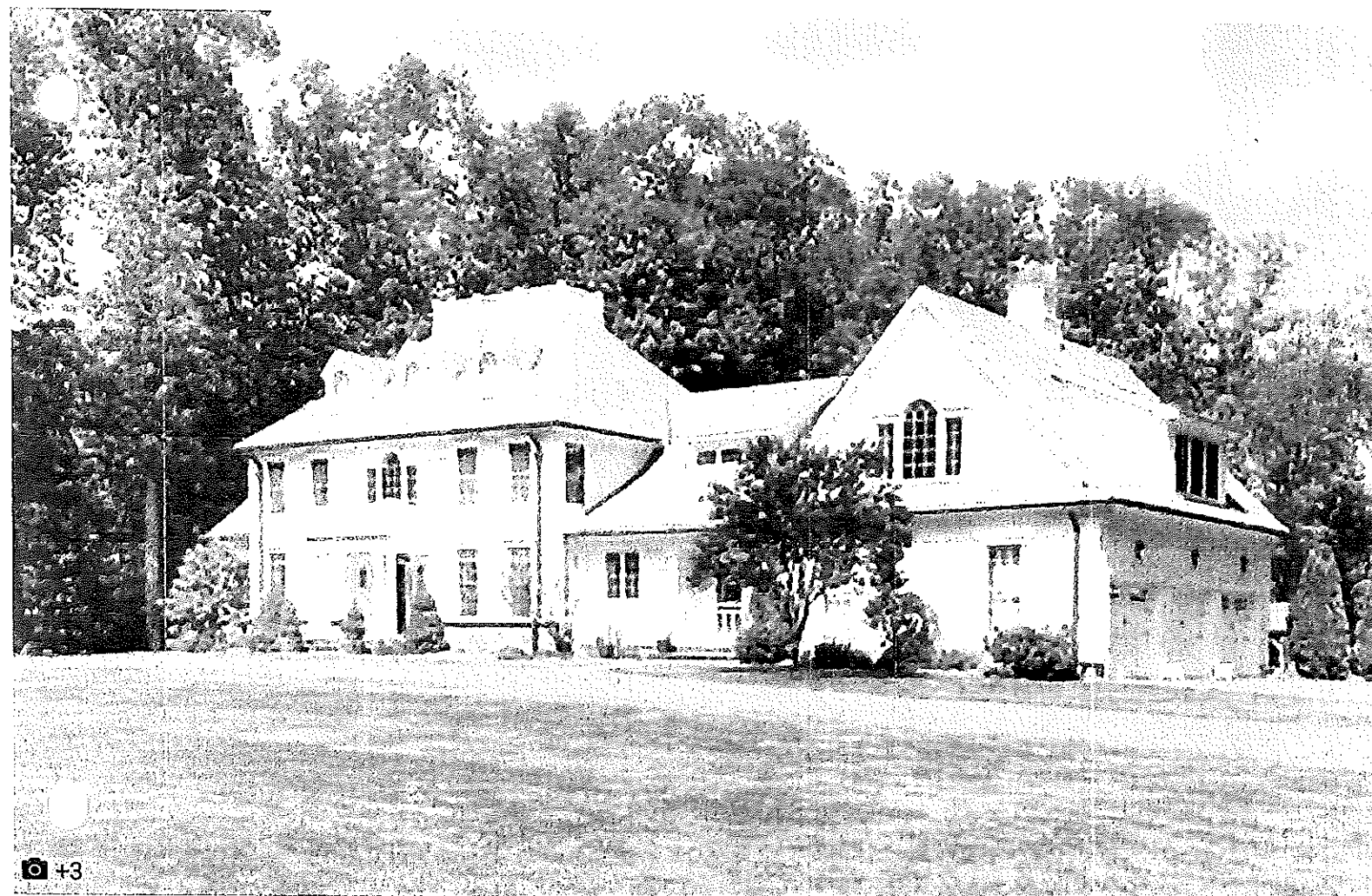
"It would certainly bring a lot of attention to Somers, and give Hillsdale, which is a very conservative college, a good foothold in New England, so I'm very much in favor of it," he said.

The group that presented the Monticello idea to the Economic Development Commission, which includes former Probate Judge Timothy R.E. Keeney, Walter Dumas, and Paul Salva, still has to present the idea to the Zoning Commission.

They said at the Economic Development Commission meeting that the presentation likely would take place in March or April, but now Keeney said that he expects the group to present in May at the earliest.

Commission supports mill, college projects in Somers

Somers first selectman stays neutral on Hillsdale proposal



Hillsdale returns: College seeks to operate religious institution in Somers

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[https://www.journalinquirer.com/towns/somers/hillsdale-official-explains-college-s-plan/article\\_7a65f54c-402b-11e9-8c7c-9be39fac2d0a.html](https://www.journalinquirer.com/towns/somers/hillsdale-official-explains-college-s-plan/article_7a65f54c-402b-11e9-8c7c-9be39fac2d0a.html)

# Hillsdale official explains college's plan

By Jackie Nappo  
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Mar 6, 2019

Commission supports mill,  
college projects in Somers

Hillsdale College official's  
speech showcases  
conservative stance

Somers first selectman stays  
neutral on Hillsdale proposal



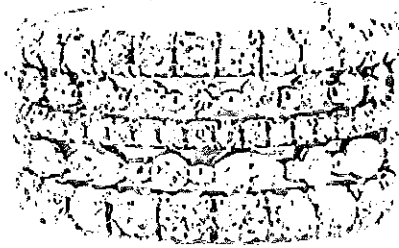
Hillsdale returns: College  
seeks to operate religious  
institution in Somers

SOMERS — About 70 residents gathered Tuesday night to hear Hillsdale College's chief of staff, Michael Harner, discuss the plan to open a satellite location of the conservative liberal arts college in town.

Hillsdale's "Prestley and Helen Blake Center for Business, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship" would be located on the Blake family's 77-acre estate, with the addition of their daughter's home and the replica Monticello mansion they built in 2014. S. Presley Blake and his brother founded the Friendly's restaurant chain.

Harner emphasized that the campus won't have students living in the area. He said it will be used for seminars, teacher training, and events featuring speakers.

# BRILLIANT EARTH



## Shop Wedding Rings

One of the first things Harner addressed was why Blake's family reached out to the college to take over its property. He said the family made the overture because Hillsdale's principles align with the family's.

The principles taught by Hillsdale are individual liberty, personal responsibility, free enterprise, and constitutional government, Harner said.

He acknowledged that Hillsdale's beliefs are conservative but said the topics the college teaches aren't necessarily politicized in the modern sense of the word.

"We have a particular view about the founding of this country and the founding documents — that it was good, that it made sense in view of establishing individual rights for all, and that governments are required, but they're there to protect those rights and not assume them," he said.

As for whether a Democrat would be as likely to attend a Hillsdale event as a Republican, Harner said people will naturally attend things that they are interested in. But he



added that it would "be good if we would all take an interest in things that we don't necessarily like or consider."

Because Hillsdale is a nonprofit college, it wouldn't have to pay taxes to Somers.

Harner estimated during the event, held at Joanna's Restaurant on Main Street, that the town's revenue loss will come to about \$100,000 a year.

"It's a concern that we're trying to address," he said.

Edward Fedorowich, a resident of Somers for close to 50 years, asked Harner if Hillsdale could commit to paying the \$100,000 that the Blakes and the Papales, who are the current owners of the Monticello property, are paying.

Harner said that the college is committed to replacing those funds. But he said college officials aren't yet sure exactly how they will do so.

Selectman Timothy Potrikus, who also attended the event, said it was a concern to him that Harner didn't have a concrete plan to replace the tax revenue at this stage.

"He answered the question without answering it," Potrikus said. "There were no specifics."

Potrikus added that the state has a payment in lieu of taxes program that the college could use as a model. He said the town would gladly accept the money.

Harner said the college will need to install parking for about 100 cars on the property to accommodate the

events, which he anticipates wouldn't exceed 100 people and would typically attract 25 to 75.

Harner said traffic studies and economic impact studies haven't yet been done to see what impact the school will have on the area. He said the school will have more concrete answers on those questions by the time of the Zoning Commission's May meeting.

In order for Hillsdale to open the satellite campus in Somers, the Zoning Commission would have to approve a zone change for Hall Hill Road where the three adjoining properties are located, changing their designation from "residential" to "special use." The commission is expected to take the issue up at the May meeting.

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# Changes may affect Hillsdale College plan: Somers zoning panel to discuss draft of new regulations

By Jackie Nappo  
jnappo@journalinquirer.com  
Apr 29, 2019

SOMERS — The Zoning Commission will hold a special meeting tonight to discuss a draft of new zoning regulations that will have a direct impact on a proposal for the Michigan-based Hillsdale College to open a satellite campus off Hall Hill Road on property owned by the former co-founder of the Friendly's restaurant chain.

The meeting takes place at 6:30 p.m. in the auditorium at Town Hall.

In order for Hillsdale, a politically conservative small liberal arts college, to open the satellite campus, the zoning needs to be changed for that portion of Hall Hill Road.



For example, residential districts would prohibit nonprofit institutions and nonprofit events, both of which would cause problems for Hillsdale if Hall Hill Road is zoned as residential, as opposed to rural or village residential.

The draft makes no mention of Hall Hill Road specifically and does not include a map with proposed zone changes.

Residents have become active with lawn signs and letters on both sides of the issue — opposing and approving of the proposed satellite campus — some asking the Zoning Commission to make changes that would accommodate Hillsdale and others asking it to keep the zoning as it is.

The Journal Inquirer obtained six letters from residents expressing opposition about the potential of Hillsdale creating a satellite campus on Hall Hill Road, many of which citing as concerns the property tax loss to the town due to college's nonprofit status and maintaining the small town charm of the area.

The JI has also obtained six letters from supporters, sent in by Timothy R.E. Keeney, with residents saying that the proposal has value and it could be positive educationally and culturally for Somers to have Hillsdale as part of the community.

Tonight's meeting is not a public hearing, but the scheduling of a public hearing and future public informational meetings are on the agenda.

[https://www.journalinquirer.com/connecticut\\_and\\_region/hillsdale-backers-still-optimistic-despite-somers-draft-regulations-that-don/article\\_02dc1aea-7593-11e9-958f-dbd6a40229d0.html](https://www.journalinquirer.com/connecticut_and_region/hillsdale-backers-still-optimistic-despite-somers-draft-regulations-that-don/article_02dc1aea-7593-11e9-958f-dbd6a40229d0.html)

# Hillsdale backers still optimistic: Despite Somers' draft regulations that don't permit it

By Jackie Nappo  
May 13, 2019



Friendly's co-founder S. Prestley Blake and his wife, Helen, pose in 2014 in front of their then-nearly completed multimillion-dollar replica of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello mansion on Hall Hill Road in Somers. (Jim Michaud / Journal Inquirer)

SOMERS — Despite the unveiling of an early draft of updated zoning regulations that would not permit Michigan-based Hillsdale College to open an educational and business center on land donated by the cofounder of the Friendly's restaurant chain, supporters remain optimistic that their vision will become a reality.

Friendly's cofounder S. Prestley Blake, 104, and his wife, Helen, who's in her 80s, want to create a Hillsdale College-affiliated nonprofit educational and business center in their name through donations of their 77-acre estate, their daughter's home, and the buyback of the multimillion-dollar replica of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello mansion they built in 2014 and later sold to a private buyer.

All are located off Hall Hill Road, and the replica Monticello would be the centerpiece of the proposal.

The Blakes want to call the site The Prestley and Helen Blake Center for Business, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship. The conservative-learning liberal arts Hillsdale College would host seminars and educational outreach events at the center on the topics of liberty, limited government under the Constitution, entrepreneurship, and property rights.

The Blakes' plan includes giving Hillsdale a \$25 million endowment for the upkeep of the properties.

Hall Hill Road, where the educational and business center would be located, including the Monticello property at 732 Hall Hill Road, is currently considered an A-zone, which means it is a residential district where no one can apply for a special use permit to establish something else there.

For the property to potentially be turned into an educational and business center, Hall Hill Road's zoning would have to change to a less prohibitive zone, and then the Blakes and Hillsdale would have to apply for a special use permit.



The draft of the updated zoning regulations was unveiled during a Zoning Commission meeting on April 29, it contained no change in the zoning for Hall Hill Road, which would make establishing an educational and business center there impossible.

Still, Helen Blake remains undaunted.

"This is very important to us, I think it's very important to the town," she said of the proposal she and her husband have put forth. "I'm totally convinced it's a win-win, it's good for everybody. So there's no chance we're giving it up."

When asked about opposition to the proposal by neighbors and others, Helen Blake said she doesn't think there are as many opponents in town as some people say there are.

"I think it's very few and they're misunderstanding," she said.

Timothy R.E. Keeney, a longtime resident and former probate judge who is serving as the Blakes' lawyer, said the Blakes have not yet purchased the Monticello replica back from the current owners — who have indicated they're willing to sell — but he suspects there will be more information about the sale in June.

"Obviously, the Blakes' property being transferred to Hillsdale College is something the Blakes feel very strongly about to begin with, so that's going to happen ... and so Hillsdale will end up owning the property," Keeney said.

Zoning Enforcement Officer Jennifer Roy said that regardless of who owns the property, it would have to remain a single-family residence and couldn't be used as a public or private school or nonprofit institution as zoning for the area now stands.

Hillsdale would, however, have the option to apply for a tax exemption, according to Assessor Walter Topliff.

Topliff said there are single-family residences in town that are tax exempt for a variety of reasons, and exemptions are granted based on the merits of the application.

Residents and town officials have expressed concern about the economic impact of the Blakes' proposal because the town would lose about \$100,000 annually in tax revenue if the properties were completely tax exempt because Hillsdale is nonprofit.

Despite the intention to donate the property to Hillsdale College regardless of the zoning outcome, Keeney and the Blakes' are hoping that ultimately the final draft of the zoning regulations will eliminate the A-zone completely — which Hall Hill Road is currently designated — and if that happens, it could allow the Blakes'

proposal to become a reality.

The commission is holding a public information meeting at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, May 22, in the auditorium at Town Hall to give residents a chance to voice their opinions about the draft of the zoning regulations. Keeney said he anticipates many people will be attending to speak on the topic.

In an effort to rally support for their cause, the Blakes have developed a website and Facebook page dedicated to their proposal, where people can find information about their legacy in town and the Hillsdale plan.

The website and Facebook page can be found at

<http://www.afriendlyproposal.com/>

[www.facebook.com/afriendlyproposal/](http://www.facebook.com/afriendlyproposal/)

<http://www.afriendlyproposal.com/>

The website contains a personal video message from the Blakes about their proposal as well as information that addresses concerns neighbors have expressed, including ways to avoid seeing the 100-space parking lot needed for the educational and business center, how light pollution from the parking lot would be avoided, and a plan to minimize traffic on Hall Hill Road.

The website mentions that the Blakes are drawing up plans to construct an access road that would enable traffic to arrive and depart from the rear of the property, directly to and from the parking lot.

The website does not yet offer an answer on how the Blakes plan to replenish the town's tax revenue that would be lost from donating their property to Hillsdale. However, it does state that the Blakes are "developing a plan to ensure that a revenue stream is available to cover the lost property taxes."

Somers first selectman stays neutral on Hillsdale proposal

MORE INFORMATION



# A Friendly Proposal

Prestley and Helen Blake Center for Business, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship

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## Frequently Asked Questions

The following Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) were developed by Pres and Helen Blake in conjunction with Hillsdale College officials to help answer the many questions being asked about the proposed Prestley and Helen Blake Center for Business, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship. If you have a question that isn't addressed in this FAQ, please email Pres and Helen at [presandhelen@afriendlyproposal.com](mailto:presandhelen@afriendlyproposal.com). They will respond promptly.

**Q.** What is planned for the Prestley and Helen Blake Center for Business, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship?

**A.** The Blake Center will host small-scale seminars, teacher trainings, and presentations on important, timely topics—perhaps 20 events annually, attended by 25 to 75 people per event.

**Q.** Will the Blake Center offer classes for undergraduate or graduate students?

**A.** No, Hillsdale College will not hold classes for undergraduate or graduate students at the Blake Center.

**Q.** What is the plan to address concerns expressed by neighbors on Hall Hill Road that the Blake Center will adversely affect them?

**A.** The Blakes are overseeing design and logistical details that will address neighbors' concerns about traffic impacts. The **Being a Good Neighbor** section of the website provides helpful information about this.



**Q.** How do the Blakes and Hillsdale College plan to help the town recoup lost property taxes once the Blakes' property is donated to Hillsdale?

**A.** The Blakes are developing a plan to ensure that a revenue stream is available to cover the lost property taxes. An announcement about the plan will be made in the coming weeks.

**Q.** How will the Blake Center be funded?

**A.** The Blakes will provide a \$25 million endowment to ensure that the Blake Center has the funds to operate in perpetuity.

**Q.** Why do Somers zoning regulations need to be changed in order to establish the Blake Center?

**A.** Under current zoning regulations, the Blake Center proposal cannot be considered by the Somers Zoning Commission. A draft overhaul of the town's zoning regulations presented by the town's professional zoning consultant in October 2018 included a change that would have allowed the proposed Blake Center to be considered by the Zoning Commission through a Special Use Permit. At a recent meeting, the Zoning Commission rejected this recommendation. Currently, the Commission is contemplating adopting a permanent overhaul that will prevent it from considering a Special Use Permit for the Blake Center.

## Plan for the Future

Prestley and Helen Blake have made an important charitable decision that will benefit the Somers community and help cement their legacy as generous philanthropists.

The 104-year-old Prestley and his wife Helen have decided to donate their property on Hall Hill Road, including the replica of Monticello they built, to Hillsdale College.

The College plans to establish the Prestley and Helen Blake Center for Business, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship at Monticello. Details about the Blake Center will be provided in a Friendly Proposal being developed for consideration by the Somers Zoning Commission. The Blake Center will host small-scale seminars, teacher trainings, and presentations on important, timely topics—perhaps 20 events annually, attended by 25 to 75 people per event.

The Center will also be available to local community organizations and churches that wish to hold retreats, seminars, or meetings that fall within attendee guidelines.

The Blakes will leave a \$25 million endowment to ensure that the Blake Center has the funds to operate in perpetuity. This generous gift will enable events at the facility to be free of charge to invited guests.

Understandably, neighbors have concerns, and the Blakes and Hillsdale College are committed to addressing those concerns. We're pleased to share how the design approaches to the Blake Center can ensure that the facility is a welcome addition to the community.

### Accommodating Parking for Event Attendees

The Monticello property has considerable land behind the building that can accommodate a 100-car parking lot. This will ensure that vehicles parked at the site for periodic events will not be visible by neighbors living near Monticello.

### Avoiding Light Pollution

Since many of the events envisioned for the Blake Center will be scheduled in the evening to accommodate guests' work schedules, special lighting will be used in the parking lot behind Monticello to limit the visibility of these lights to neighbors on Hall Hill Road.

### Minimizing Traffic Disruptions

To avoid any disruption to neighbors as event attendees arrive and depart Monticello, plans are under way to construct an access road off of Hall Hill Road. This will enable traffic to arrive and depart from the rear of the property, directly into and from the parking lot.

### Maintenance of Grounds

Prior to the Blakes' acquisition of the Monticello property, the grounds featured many structures, including a church and various outbuildings, some of which were in disrepair. The Blakes' property design resulted in the singular structure of Monticello surrounded by a beautiful landscape of lush lawn, trees, and plantings. Once donated to

Monticello grounds crew will impeccably maintain the pristine landscaping, ensuring that Monticello continues to be among the many beautifully landscaped properties along Hall Hill Road.