

Somers winery has permission to put up tents for special events

Neighbors not happy, say they may contest special-use permit

By Susan Danseyar
STAFF WRITER

SOMERS — Couples can now tie the knot on a bucolic 98-acre winery without worrying their wedding guests will be prey to the vicissitudes of weather, but they may be tempted to schedule their marital celebrations soon due to possible court action.

Mark and Karen Murdoch, owners of Worthington Vineyard and Winery at 359 Mountain Road, have been granted permission by the Zoning Commission to put up temporary tents for special rental events,

which has distressed two neighbors.

"If you approve this, we'll be right back in court," said George Schober, the attorney for Ken and Michelle Prior of 364 Mountain Road, before commission members unanimously voted March 4 to amend text of the Murdochs' special-use permit to allow the short-term event tents.

The Zoning Commission's decision now allows the Murdochs to put up one 20-by-40-foot tent up to 48 hours before an event and take it down 48 hours after the event is over. The tents must be placed behind the winery's

tasting room near a covered bridge on the property.

Dory Famiglietti, the attorney for the Murdochs, said a 2006 court case found the prior owner of 359 Mountain Road could not put up seasonal tents. That request, however, was entirely different from the Murdochs' because the tents would have been larger and on the property for six months. What her clients want is permission to have temporary tents, put up and taken down within a few days, for parties no larger than 120 people.

Schober said the commission should not grant the Murdochs' request without a site review because a new structure, albeit temporary, would be going up on the property. "The text amendment has to be denied because it doesn't meet your regulations."

Mark Murdoch said he and his wife have used temporary tents for special events in the past but didn't realize they were not allowed.

"What other property is not allowed to put up tents?" Murdoch asked. "We see them elsewhere and ours would be in a location no one would know is here."

In fact, he said, no one would know about tents on the winery's property unless seeing social media posts about events or if a drone flew over the property.

Murdoch told commission members there were five weddings on the property last year and most had about 120 guests.

Ken Prior said he knows when tents are up because the music coming from them "permeates" his house. "This facility

has a history of violating zoning regulations and continues to do so to this day," he said.

The Priors have a long-standing dispute with the Murdochs and the town over the winery's existence. They have filed a number of lawsuits over the past two years, including against the town's Zoning Commission for issuing the special permit that has allowed the owners to operate their winery, and against the Murdochs themselves for various events that the Priors say are not allowed on the property.

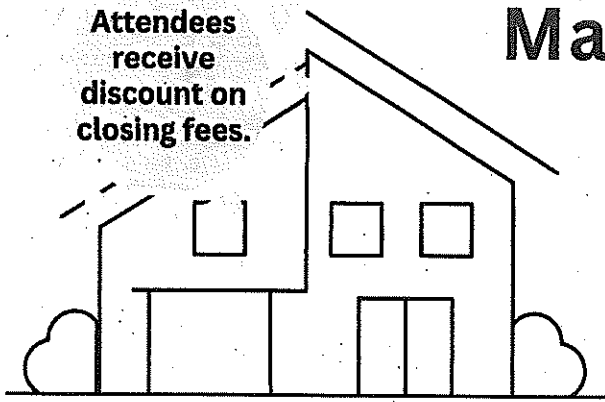
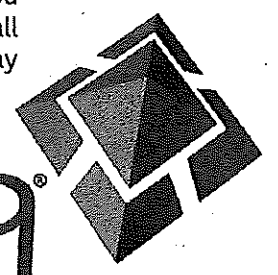
On Oct. 2, 2023, the Zoning Commission granted modifications to the Murdochs' permit that included increasing the number of parking spaces allowed on the property for events from 30 to 195, permission to have food vendors and food trucks, and amplified music. The Priors' most recent lawsuit was filed Oct. 17 in Tolland Superior Court against the Zoning Commission, claiming the modifications were illegal.

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CIAC CHAMPIONSHIPS

OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP

Where: Saturday, 1 p.m., Yale's Kipthut Pool,

Champion: Greenwich

Runner-up: Ridgefield

Key players: Greenwich (LL), New Canaan, Pomperaug (M), Weston (S)

Defenders: Greenwich, New Canaan, McMahon, Fairfield Prep

TV: NFHS Network (subscription required)

GoFan.co

WHAT TO KNOW

The State Open contenders begins with The Cardinals have won 37 championships, those coming in the 22 Opens held since year, they won their ninth straight title in

CIAC BOYS SWIMMING

In fashion, scoring 636 points to runner-up 393. The Cardinals' biggest challenge will come from New Canaan, which won its fourth Class L championship on Tuesday and was runner-up to Greenwich by a mere 38 points. It isn't quite as deep as the Cards, but can win in the fast heats behind elite swimmers for Deacon Mascarinas and juniors Jack Hui Huang. Class L runner-up Fairfield Prep, or Owen Tharrington, is also in the hunt, as is McMahon co-op, which was the Class LL behind senior Mike Kvashchuk and Wyatt Vitiello. Last year's runner-up, is still strong and features one of the state's best swimmers in Jack Clancy, the defending Open champion in the 200 and 500 freestyles. Pomperaug won its fourth straight Class M title behind three juniors Robert Regan on Monday and figures for a top spot.

SWIMMERS TO WATCH

Jack Clancy, Sr., Ridgefield: The Penn-State commit is the state champion in the 200 and 500 freestyles at the State Open and has shown no signs of slowing down. He also won two events at this year's State Open, earning a pair of top seeds for the Open.

Robert Regan, Sr., Greenwich: A Gettysburg commit, Regan won three gold medals from last year's State Open, winning the 100 freestyle and helping the team win the 400 freestyle relays finish first. He was the runner-up in the Class LL meets, winning the 200 freestyles and as part of two relays.

Deacon Mascarinas, Sr., New Canaan: Mascarinas has been the star in the last two Class L championships, winning the 100 and 200 freestyle events each season to help the Rams' win their fourth straight titles. The Colgate commit will be looking for New Canaan as it looks to challenge for the top spot at the Open.

Robert Regan, Jr., Pomperaug: The junior won three titles in the State Open as he helps the Panthers claim their fourth CIAC Class M championship on Monday.

Owen Tharrington, Jr., Fairfield Prep: Tharrington, a senior, was third in the State Open 100 freestyle as a sophomore, and was a double-winner in the 200 and 500 freestyles at the State Open meet on Tuesday, taking first in both the 200 and the 500 individual medley.

— Dave Stewart

CIAC GIRLS BASKETBALL CHAMPIONSHIPS

**NO. 3 HAMDEN (24-3)
VS NO. 1 SACRED HEART ACADEMY (25-2)**

When: Sunday, 6:35 p.m.

Where: Mohegan Sun Arena, Uncasville

Tickets: \$10 per session (day/night). Available online (with service charge) or at arena box office.

On the air/web: NFHS Network (Subscription required)

Championship game appearances: Hamden is making its second appearance in a championship game after beating Ludlowe in last year's Class LL final. SHA is making its fifth appearance, winning Class MM in 2022 over St. Joseph and Class L in 1992 and 1993.

Key players: Hamden: Kamora Moore, 5-6, Jr. G; Alana Philpotts, 5-9, Sr. G; Leah Philpotts, 5-9, Sr. SHA: Lauren Thompson, 5-6, Sr. G; Morgan Miller, 5-9, Sr. F; Meghan Kirck, 5-7, Sr. G

You should know: This is the first time the rivals, who are separated by 1.2 miles, have met for a state championship. They have met in the last two SCC title games with Hamden winning both. Hamden is looking to become the first team since NFA in 2009 and 2010 to repeat as Class LL champion.

Outlook: This is the championship matchup people have been anticipating since December. The rivals have already played three times this season with Hamden winning twice, including in the SCC championship. The winner of the game will likely be ranked as the No. 1 team in the final GameTimeCT Girls Basketball Top 10 Poll. Hamden is the No. 1 ranked team in the poll and SHA is No. 2. Hamden and SHA have been the only two teams to occupy the No. 1 spot in the GameTimeCT Poll this season. Both teams like to get out and run and can put up points in bunches. The shot clock will rarely drop into single digits in this one. This is the second straight year the top two teams in the GameTimeCT Top 10 Poll will meet for the Class LL championship after No. 1 Hamden beat No. 2 Ludlowe last season.

Scott Ericson's pick: Hamden

CLASS L

**NO 2 SIMSBURY (22-4)
VS NO. 1 HOLY CROSS (24-2)**

When: Saturday, 6:35 p.m.

Where: Mohegan Sun Arena, Uncasville

Tickets: \$10 per session (day/night). Available online (with service charge) or at arena box office.

On the air/web: NFHS Network (Subscription required)

Championship game appearances: This is Simsbury's first appearance in a state championship game. Holy Cross won Class M in 2022 over Bacon Academy. The Crusaders have reached the championship six times previously, winning titles in 2022 and 2007.

Key players: Holy Cross: Shanika Howard, 5-7, Jr. G; Corrine Lomax, 6-0, So. F; Isabella Lombardo, 5-9, Jr. G Simsbury: Amanda Gallagher, 6-0, Sr. G; Olivia Jarvis, 5-11, Sr. F; Alexa Gallagher, 5-8, Jr. F

You should know: Neither of these teams won their conference tournaments before making runs to the state championship.

Outlook: Simsbury is the best defensive team remaining in the state tournaments, holding Windsor to 31 in the quarterfinal and New Milford to 32 points in the semifinal. The Trojans are also extremely patient on offense and will use a lot of the 35-second shot clock on many possessions as they move the ball around looking for high percentage shots. Holy Cross would rather open things up and can get out and go with Shanika Howard and 6-foot sophomore Corrine Lomax, who can run the floor as well as any post

player in the state.

Scott Ericson's pick: Simsbury

CLASS MM

**NO. 5 SHEEHAN (21-6)
VS NO. 2 NORTHWEST CATHOLIC (23-5)**

When: Saturday, 3 p.m.

Where: Mohegan Sun Arena, Uncasville

Tickets: \$10 per session (day/night). Available online (with service charge) or at arena box office.

On the air/web: NFHS Network (Subscription required)

Championship game appearances: Northwest Catholic has played in 10 title games, winning four times, including last season in Class S over Kolbe Cathedral. The Lions also won championships in 1988, 1996 and 1999. Sheehan has played in three finals, last appearing in Class M in 2019. The Titans last won a title in 1976 in Class L.

Key players: Northwest Catholic: Maeve Rushin, 6-1, Sr. F; Lilly Pare, 5-6, Sr. G; Abigail Casper, 6-0, So. F Sheehan: Megan Wreslen, 5-8, So. F; Liv Cassesse, 5-4, Sr. G; Ella Dorsey, 5-5, Sr. G

You should know: Northwest Catholic has moved up from Class S to Class MM. The last team to win a state title, move up in class and win again was Capital Prep. The Trailblazers won Class S in 2013, then moved up and won Class L in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Outlook: Both teams have strong seniors, but are paced by super sophomores in Abigail Casper of Northwest Catholic and Megan Wreslen from Sheehan, both of whom were all-conference and their team's leading scorer. Sheehan lost to Hamden three times, SHA twice and Newington once. SHA and Hamden are in the Class LL final and Newington was in the semifinals. Those are the only blemishes on the Titans record.

Scott Ericson's pick: Sheehan

CLASS S

**NO 4 SOMERS (20-6)
VS NO. 2 THOMASTON (22-4)**

When: Sunday, 12:30 p.m.

Where: Mohegan Sun Arena, Uncasville

Tickets: \$10 per session (day/night). Available online (with service charge) or at arena box office.

On the air/web: NFHS Network (Subscription required)

Championship game appearances: This is Thomaston's 10th appearance in a championship, last winning in 2022 over Coventry in Class S for the school's fourth overall championship. Somers has played in two finals, the last time in 1984. They last won a state championship in 1977.

Key players: Thomaston: Nicole Decker, 5-7, Sr. G; Ava Harkness, 5-10, Sr. C; Rejhana Allu, 5-1, Sr. G Somers: Ellana Wood, 5-9, Sr. F; Sydney Cassidy, 5-10, Jr. G; Maya Skatsk, 5-7, So. F

You should know: Thomaston is playing in a state final for the seventh time in 12 years, winning three times in that stretch.

Outlook: Thomaston is led by seniors Nicole Decker and center Ava Harkness. Decker had 18 points in the semifinal win over East Catholic, 32 against North Branford and 23 against Lyman Memorial in this tournament. Somers counters with junior Sydney Cassidy, who had 24 in the semifinal win over Bolton, and senior Ellana Wood, who scored 19 in the semis.

Scott Ericson's pick: Thomaston