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Town of Grafton
Planning Board
Municipal Building
Grafton, MA 01519

Dear Board Members:

RE: REQUEST FOR SPECIAL PERMIT AT 16 MORGAN DRIVE, GRAFTON, MA

I am writing in response to Ms. Jean Houghton's most recent communications to the Board on October 19 regarding her special-permit application to house three geese at her property on Morgan Drive.

I feel I must first address the Board and apologize for letting my emotions get the better of me at our last meeting. That day I spent with my oldest and dearest friend in the hospital; she had just suffered a debilitating stroke. On top of this, I was also dealing with a serious issue that arose with my mother, who has vascular dementia, at her assisted-living facility. I did not realize how overwhelmed I was, and I sincerely regret that those frustrations hindered more effective communication on my part.

My husband and I have read Ms. Houghton's most recent October 19 communications. We feel we need to clarify some of the details in the letter that are misleading.

Contrary to what Ms. Houghton states in her letter, my husband did not "specifically request" that she move her coop or that she move it closer to her house when we all spoke in the hall after the last meeting. He merely suggested that this might be the most reasonable location to cut down on the noise, but even that might not solve the problem. We don't want the Board to be under the assumption that there was ever an agreed-upon solution—we thought the discussions would continue. (Ms. Houghton similarly misled the Board at the last meeting when she said we specifically requested she plant trees behind her pool house to block our view of the structure. While she did indeed plant the trees and we remain appreciative, we never made this request of her. In fact, we didn't even know about the addition of the pool house until construction began. Again, we just don't want the Board to be under the impression that we've ever made any demands upon Ms. Houghton.)

There was agreement after the last meeting for the three of us to have further discussion about the issue, which ended up just being one text from Ms. Houghton and our reply. Ms. Houghton sent my husband a text that outlined the same plan she submitted to the board – the planting of trees and the moving of the coop. My husband's response to her text was essentially the same as what he previously stated – she may go to some expense and still not solve the problem regarding noise (and that there were no suggestions or plans for how she might deter predators).

iMessage
Tue, Sep 27, 1:54 PM

Hello Jean, I apologize for not getting back to you sooner, things have been very busy at our place and there has been a flu that ran through the house. I appreciate you sending off a proposed new location for the geese pen as we discussed the night of the meeting. Although it does provide additional distance which possibly addresses one issue anyway, and may or may not suffice for the building department setback requirements (A survey plot plan) along your other side. It still may not address outstanding issues such as the attraction of multiple predators which could be an issue still to be resolved. What we may possibly realize is at the end of the day if you accomplish what you propose it still may not address adequately enough the cackling noise issue which after some additional expenses on your behalf still may not be satisfactory.

We assumed that we would hear more from Ms. Houghton, perhaps a meeting of the three of us to walk the property and/or discuss in more detail her proposal and other options since we did agree at the last meeting to work with her on trying to resolve the issue.

We had no expectation that she was going to go forward and move the coop without further discussion—this is fine, but we hadn't realized that the matter was already settled in her mind. In fact, we had no idea the coop was moved until we read Ms. Houghton's letter of October 19, as there has been no noticeable reduction in the cackling and screeching. (I did notice that I was hearing the geese more loudly in my dining room than before, but I hadn't realized why—I thought perhaps the geese were simply roaming free on the property as they sometimes do). So now we have noise not only in our bedroom still, but also in the other rooms on the first floor. While entertaining friends in our dining room just a week ago, the cackling and screeching began and our friends asked, "What the hell is *that*?" They thought someone was outside screaming in distress.

Ms. Houghton also states that 10 trees have been planted along the border of where the old coop was. However, this has not occurred and is merely proposed. Further, the planting of the trees was suggested as a buffer during the meeting when Ms. Houghton was considering keeping the coop in the same area and moving it within the appropriate setback. Now that the coop has been moved and the noise is still intolerable, we do not see how those trees will make a significant difference in the level of this noise, especially when any natural buffers disappear after the leaves fall.

Our concern, as expressed in my husband's text and with Ms. Houghton after the last meeting, is that she could go to great expense and still not solve the problem. It was never our intent or desire that she incur significant costs, and while Ms. Houghton has freely made these choices, we are very uncomfortable with the position we've been put in. We want to be good neighbors. But she's already moved the coop and there is no difference in the disruption to our peace and quiet; in fact, we are now dealing with it on the entire first floor. We also don't want to take someone's pets away, but we would like to free of the noise we've been forced to endure for over a year.

Another concern is that the 9 acre-plus property at 118.5 Old Westboro Rd has been sold. More homes will be built here, perhaps as few as 4 or as many as 8; we don't know. Right now, between Ms. Houghton's neighbors and her own home, there are 4 homes on approximately 5.5 acres. The addition of new homes will increase this density of this residential area.

During the last meeting, Ms. McKendrick – whom I respect and with whom I've had constructive conversations— suggested to me that geese are no different from other livestock, such as horses, sheep and goats as far as noise. I explained to her, and she seemed dubious, that this is simply not true in our given circumstance. There are horses across the street from us, several in fact, that are stabled there. There is also an equestrian center near us. There are several goats at Houlden Farm. In 22 years, we've never had an issue with noise from any of the livestock that surround us.

I will bring to the meeting a recording of the geese that will illustrate that this sort of livestock is in no way comparable to these other animals with regard to noise. I took this recording just days ago (not knowing that the coop had been moved) while resting in my bedroom attempting to nap. It's clear now that even with the relocation of the geese, there is no change to the level of noise we continue to hear or the effect on sleep disruption during the day or night.

Regarding Houlden Farm, a neighbor of theirs, with more than the requisite acreage, kept a number of chickens on her property a few years ago. She expressed to me that even with a fenced chicken coop, she was constantly plagued with coyotes (and other predators) on her property, attracted to the chickens, even though they were caged. She eventually gave up the chickens in frustration and no longer has the issue of large predators on her property.

This was the point I was trying to make at the last meeting, where there was a differing of opinion about the geese attracting coyotes. I was told that this was only due to overpopulation in the area even though the problem didn't exist until the geese arrived. Perhaps I failed to clearly express this at the meeting: I don't understand why or how this became an either/or issue. Yes, there is overpopulation, and yes the geese attract coyotes. Can't both be true?

A simply google search of "do coyotes eat geese" and "are coyotes attracted to geese" reveals a resounding "yes", they do. Coyotes are responsible for decimating populations of Canada geese all over the US. And whether the geese are domestic or wild is of no matter –coyotes have no knowledge if the geese are in a protected or unprotected environment. And in areas where there is overpopulation and increased competition for food, coyotes (and other predators) will seek out whatever they can eat and will work harder (i.e. attempts to dig under cages) than they normally would to simply survive.

An article from the Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine has an informative article on geese as pets (there is not a lot of literature on this specific topic, likely because geese aren't the most common source of companionship and pets).

<https://vetmed.tamu.edu/news/pet-talk/geese-as-pets/>.

From the article regarding coyotes:

"Other common health problems in geese include intestinal parasites (deworming is a must), limb deformities in young geese due to poor diet, and trauma caused by dogs, coyotes or other predators." (clearly stating that coyotes are indeed predators of geese).

From the article regarding noise:

Geese are also loud, a major reason why they are not ideal for residential areas. Geese tend to vocalize when there is anything new in the environment, including other birds, wildlife, the neighborhood dog or cat and anytime someone comes through the door.

Similarly, if you research “geese as pets,” you’ll find in almost every article a warning about the noise nuisance geese create for neighbors, as well as the fact that anything that spooks the geese – be it a predator, a leaf dropping, the bark of dog, a visitor to the property, etc.– will set them off.

Ms. McKendrick and I also had a long discussion about the coyote issue in the hallway after the last meeting. She told that if a coyote were on our property that my dog was likely not safe off leash, but my grandchildren “probably” were. I told her that after seeing on the news recent coyotes attacks on humans in Massachusetts, I couldn’t possibly rely on “probably” when it came to my grandchildren. Additionally, I explained that there’s no way to know if the coyote is rabid. Ms. McKendrick understood this concern and suggested I research ways to deter coyotes. I have found nothing on this topic that is practical or would not result in significant cost: erecting a 7-foot solid fence, getting a trained guard dog and continually spraying the yard with wolf urine or vinegar. With our acreage, none of these deterrents are practical.

Again, a simply google search of “coyote attacks in Massachusetts” reveals dozens of attacks by throughout the state, and several instances where dog walkers have been surrounded by a pack of coyotes. Here is a just a sampling, by no means a comprehensive list, with most attacks having occurred *in just the past several weeks.*

August 14, 2021 from CNN.com:

“A coyote attacked a small child on a Massachusetts beach, prompting fears of a rabies infection, according to the National Park Service... The child who was bitten was transported to Cape Cod Hospital with non-life-threatening injuries, NPS said in a statement. NPS said rangers have responded to numerous incidents of coyotes acting assertively toward people throughout the summer.

September 6, 2021 from AP News: *“Two toddlers attacked by a coyotes in separate incidents in Arlington.” In the first incident, a 2 year old was bitten and dragged by a coyote. In the 2nd a toddler was approached and scratch by a coyote. A month prior, the article states, a 5-year-old playing in a sandbox was attacked by a coyote.*

September 2, 2022 from MassLive.com: *“Cohasset police warn residents of coyotes after dog is killed and person hospitalized in two separate coyote attacks.”*

September 6, 2022 from newsweek.com: *“Coyote bites man, a 7-strong pack fatally wounds dog in spree of attacks.”*

October 4, 2022 headline from WCVB.com: *“Coyotes seen chasing after girl who was walking dog in Mass. town (Hingham)”*

October 18, 2022 from WCVB.com: *“Swampscott resident surround by coyotes while walking dog.”*

NOTE: These attacks cannot be attributed to mating season aggression, as mating season for coyotes is from January through March (which is also when they appear in my yard – during a particularly aggressive period for them). None of the articles discuss whether or not the coyotes were found to be rabid or were simply aggressive.

Regarding the prevalence of rabies in coyotes, a NIH Health Report title "Aggression and Rabid Coyotes, Massachusetts" from 2010 states:

"This association between aggressive behavior and a positive rabies test result is of particular concern because of coyotes' relatively large size, their dramatically increased population, and their distribution throughout the state encompassing rural, suburban, and even urban areas. These factors increase the likelihood that a rabid animal will have the opportunity to interact with humans or their domestic animals, thus increasing the risk for rabies transmission."

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2958004/>

And that was 12 years ago; things have likely gotten only worse, not better, as more habitat is lost to development.

In fact, Cape Cod is already dealing with the issue of rampant coyote populations in most every town. Experts on the Cape also agree that the animals are no longer intimidated by the presence of humans as they've become increasingly comfortable around them as they lose habitats and share the same space (articles stating this are easily found online, and also referenced on the previous page). Packs of coyotes freely roam neighborhoods and numerous attacks on humans and pets have occurred. We have a cottage in S. Yarmouth and witnessed this for ourselves this past summer. Behind our cottage is a marshland where you can hear the coyotes howling in the early evening. We've seen them roaming the streets surrounding the marsh, clearly unfazed by the presence of humans. There is great outcry by residents in a majority of Cape towns with no easy solutions.

Even if the presence of coyotes in Grafton could be mainly attributed to an increase in population, why create a situation that only serves to attract them to a densely populated residential area where people want to be outside, allow their children to play, and walk their pets in relative safety? There is a reason for the town's 5-acre minimum and it is precisely for the reasons we are experiencing—episodes of intolerable noise and the attraction of large predators. Geese housed on property that is just over an acre and in a residential area is simply not compatible with peaceful enjoyment of one's home and property.

Respectfully,



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