

November 29, 2016

Dear Mr. Palmer,

We welcome you to New Canaan and wish you well in your new position here in the "Next Station To Heaven." As you may recall, Jennifer met you on the site tour at Grace Farms, and we will be at the upcoming Planning & Zoning hearings as well, but we wanted to give both you and the P&Z Commission our unique perspective in advance of the hearings. Please do share this letter with the members of the P&Z Commission before the meeting this evening.

We have been residents and property owners in New Canaan for over 13 years and have been in our current home (located at 1258 Smith Ridge - the white house that directly abuts the Grace Farms property to the southeast) since 2012. When we purchased our home we knew there were plans to build a church next door. At the time we had several concerns and, in doing due diligence, attended P&Z meetings, reached out to Sharon Prince and toured the Grace Farms property. In 2012 we were surprised to learn then of the scope of the functions that Grace Farms intended to use their property for. Sharon described its planned usage to us as akin to a "community center" or a "park" the entire town could use. In addition, we were shocked to hear the property would also be used as: a philanthropic foundation, a research center, supportive of the arts, social justice causes, and various charities.

After our 2012 meeting with Sharon, we sent a letter (see attached .pdf) to Steve Kleppin and the P&Z commission detailing our concerns. To quote our '12 letter to P&Z, "[T]o us it fits the description of a community center or park, and not your typical church. To be honest, in all the descriptions of what is planned to take place at Grace Farms, the church/religious services sounds like an afterthought."

This was what we knew 4 years ago. We were prepared to welcome a church as our neighbor and agreed with the conditions the P&Z commission put in place to protect the surrounding neighbors. Sadly, there has been little enforcement on these conditions, and Grace Farms seemingly has operated as we forewarned in our 2012 letter.

Allow us to share what all of this means to our family.

Privacy & Safety

Our entire property is visible from nearly every location within Grace Farm's River building (the sanctuary, the library, restaurant, the tea room, the gym). Countless

numbers of people watch us come and go from our home. The walking path at Grace Farms brings numerous strangers within a stone's throw of our property.

We consistently hear people yelling and children crying from the Grace Farm's property. Our two small children, when they play outside, are regularly exposed to strangers who have waved at them. Others watch our family from a bench on the path. We can't begin to express just how unnerving it is to glance out your window and have people looking back at you.

We understand that it's one thing for a person to be seen, on occasion, by their neighbor. But typically you would, at the very least, be familiar with that person. Our situation is quite a different scenario -- imagine hundreds of literal strangers peering into your backyard and watching your children play. Living in a fishbowl puts it mildly.

To make matters worse, visitors to Grace Farms are "encouraged to enjoy unstructured time throughout the grounds." Visitors are invited to explore their property unsupervised. For example, the latest offering is for snowshoeing -- enabling strangers to go off-path and come even closer to our home.

From our property, we see the lights of Grace Farms all the way from their barns to their sanctuary. It is akin to living next to an airport or a shopping center.

We have witnessed cars from out-of-state park on Smith Ridge next to our home to get a better view of Grace Farms. Groups of strangers walk the fence line up to our property to get a better view and take photos. Again, it is very uncomfortable to have our sense of privacy continually tested.

The very idea of a home includes safety and privacy, and we feel that ours is being stolen from us every day.

Property Value

It seems obvious that a house overlooking a large commercial enterprise such as Grace Farms is a drawback to potential home buyers. In 2012 we witnessed several people at an open house for our home spin on their heels and leave when they heard about a proposed church to be built next door. Prospective home buyers interested in the 4 acre zones of New Canaan covet privacy.

Quality of Life

Simply put, Grace Farms has ruined our enjoyment of our property. In addition, a Grace Farms that is allowed to continue to grow unchecked will only multiply the above problems.

Conclusion

Four years ago we came before this commission with grave concerns that this “church” next door would turn into something far larger and vast. It has. Here we are now, four years later, coming before you once again with fears of what Grace Farms will turn into four years into the future.

We were prepared to welcome a church as our new neighbor. Our family’s safety, privacy and enjoyment of property should not bear the brunt of what is instead in existence there today and what they are applying for tomorrow.

We request that the Commission deny Grace Farm’s current application and require they adhere to the permit they were originally granted. In addition, we seek assurances surrounding the safety and security surrounding our home. At a minimum, we ask for screening (evergreen trees, shrubs, etc.) as well as security (permanent marking of the walking path so it can’t shift closer over time, to maintain a buffer zone).

Thank you in advance for your time and please let me know if you have any questions or need any additional information. Our contact information can be found below.

Sincerely,
Mike & Jennifer Buczkiewicz

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