March 2, 2020

Planning Board
Town of Tiverton, Town Hall
343 Highland Road
Tiverton, RI 02878
via email to Tara Ferreira, Land Use Clerk, landuse@tiverton.ri.gov and Susan Gill, Chair, PBChair@tiverton.ri.gov
Copy to owner’s representative: Joel Lindsay/ jlindsay@ameresco.com

Re: Petition for Final Plan, Wingover Solar Farm at 1519 Crandall Road

Dear Tiverton Planning Board:

Preserve Rhode Island asks that the Planning Board in Tiverton approve the development plan at Wingover Farm for an industrial solar installation only if the development is re-configured so that the historic building on site may continue to be used and does not result in its demolition or removal.

Historic Asset: Tiverton’s Comprehensive Plan uses the 1983 inventory of historic resources by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission as the basis for prioritizing historic preservation efforts. The property now known as Wingover Farm was listed in the 1983 inventory as the Reuben Hart Farm (late 18th century – early 19th century, page 64) at 1519 Crandall Road. The property is a farm complex centered around a 1½-story wood shingled federal period farmhouse with a 1-story ell at the rear. Several later outbuildings are located behind the house. Deed research indicates a building existed on this site as early as 1706. This is a modest farmstead complex characteristic of Tiverton’s agricultural past that retains its architectural integrity. In addition, the property has an interesting historical association with 20th century rum running during Prohibition.

Historic properties and community character: As the Tiverton Comprehensive Plan states: “Rural character may be difficult to define, but it is unequivocally clear that the people of Tiverton want to keep it.” Wingover Farm, with its complex of buildings that includes the historic farmhouse and later outbuildings, enclosed by stone walls and surrounded by fields, is certainly an important survivor contributing to Tiverton’s historic character as an agricultural community. The farmhouse in its setting, dating from the 18th century, presents a scenic farmstead, increasingly rare in Tiverton, and indeed in Rhode Island. The Tiverton Comprehensive Plan emphasizes the scenic quality of the town’s rural landscape as being particularly attractive and worthy of being protected. “The conservation of those natural and historic features is crucial if Tiverton is to maintain its integrity and avoid becoming a faceless suburb.”

Tiverton’s Comprehensive Plan: Tiverton’s Planning Board has the unique responsibility to prepare and steward the town’s Comprehensive Plan: Planning Board land use decisions are required to conform to the Comprehensive Plan. Tiverton’s Comprehensive Plan outlines a vision for the future that accommodates growth and change and explicitly incorporates the need for the preservation of the
essential characteristics of the rural, small town community. The Plan recognizes that “Tiverton’s old buildings are particularly vulnerable to loss.” Nowhere in its 180 pages does Tiverton’s Comprehensive Plan suggest that the Planning Board approve a reconfiguration of lots around almost 300-year old house so that it can no longer be used. Instead, the Comprehensive Plan recognizes the special challenge to protect the natural and cultural assets of the town while providing for economic growth. This is the challenge that faces the Planning Board today.

Preserving the building seems to not interfere with the proposed installation: We do not see why the historic building needs to be removed to allow for the solar installation: there is adequate land for the solar array and the historic building to coexist. How is it that current planning and zoning rules will now prohibit the continued use of a venerable building that has been on this land since the Revolutionary War? A planning decision that disallows the use of one of the town’s inventoried historic assets is entirely contrary to the intent of the Comprehensive Plan. When an outcome simply doesn’t fit what the Town has so clearly stated they want by means of the Comprehensive Plan – the preservation of its rural character and its historic places -- that is reason to reconsider. Surely a plan can be devised that allows for the continued use of this historic place. The property exists currently on four parcels: why can’t the farmhouse be configured on a separate residential lot? If there need to be variances, easements or allowances for reduced setback, so be it – in the interests of preserving the historic place.

To be preserved, historic buildings must be used: Any homeowner knows that buildings require continued maintenance: roofs need to be repaired; systems need updates, wood needs to be painted, and this list goes on. There is no incentive to provide maintenance for a building that cannot be productively used.

Vacancy: Historic buildings that have no use are doomed. Vacancy and abandonment start an inevitable march towards demolition by neglect and vandalism.

Moving: There is almost never a “someone” who will come to rescue a threatened historic building by moving it to a new location. Moving is an expensive and complicated process; it’s extremely rare when “someone” is waiting for the opportunity to fund and involve themselves in this endeavor. And for this historic place at Wingover Farm, moving defeats much of the preservation goal of protecting Tiverton’s rural character. The building contributes most to the town’s sense of place in its existing context. Nevertheless, Preserve RI has learned of some who are interested in assessing the relocation of this building -- so moving may be an option to explore in this case.

Has the developer put forth their best effort to save the historic place? The Planning Board is charged with making decisions in the best interests of surrounding properties and consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. The developer is not making this an easy decision for the Planning Board because they have made apparently little effort to consider ways to minimize harm to the historic building on the property. From the beginning they seem to have missed that the farm is included in the published inventory of historic assets of the town. Why should the Planning Board approve this industrial scale project in a residential zone, particularly if efforts to protect important cultural assets have been negligible? Faced with lackluster efforts to minimize harm to historic assets, why allow the project to go forward when it contradicts the Comprehensive Plan?
**Preserve Rhode Island’s offer of assistance:** Preserve RI is a nonprofit charitable organization advocating for protection of historic places and character in Rhode Island.

- We offer pragmatic experience and hands-on help in making good land use decisions and following through with help to accomplish preservation projects.
- We can assist in evaluating the feasibility of alternatives, including preservation in place and the viability of moving structures.
- Preserve RI has undertaken many preservation projects around the state:
  - If Ameresco is unsure how to deal with an historic building, PRI is willing to step up.
  - PRI has previously partnered with other landowners to provide the project and property management needed to preserve historic places.
    - For example, in both Smithfield and Lincoln, Preserve RI has entered into a long-term lease of an historic building.
    - Preserve RI used its revolving fund to conduct needed rehabilitation.
    - Preserve RI then acts as the property manager/landlord, managing the property and repaying our investment through the sublease of the rehabbed historic building.
    - In concept, just such an arrangement seems feasible at Wingover Farm. If the developer is willing to cooperate on a preservation alternative and the town is willing to allow for the continued use of the property, we should get going to evaluate the viability of a preservation plan.
- Preserve RI reached out to the owner last week to arrange a site visit to Wingover Farm to evaluate its significance, its building conditions and to explore alternatives. We haven’t yet heard whether the owners are willing to take us up on our offer to assist. We hope they will.

Preserve RI urges the Planning Board to take up, in the words of Tiverton’s Comprehensive Plan, “the special challenge” to protect its historic assets while allowing for growth and new development. In the current situation, the exercise of flexibility and thoughtfulness would result in saving this very old historic building and allow it to remain a part of the Town’s historic and rural character.

We at Preserve RI are very willing to help make this happen.

Sincerely

Valerie Talmage
Executive Director, Preserve Rhode Island

Cc: Sue Anderson, Tiverton Historical Preservation Advisory Board
    Jeff Emidy, Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission