

For the record, my name is John McCann and I co own North Branch Vineyards with Representative Kate McCann. I have been the president, education chair and legislative chair for the Vermont Grape and Wine Council and I have taught viticulture and enology classes at Vermont Technical College. I worked with now Representative Sibilila on the Vermont Wine and Harvest Festival in Wilmington VT 14 years ago. Prior to growing grapes and making wine, I was an aerospace engineer with the Boeing Company. Kate, besides being a representative, is a high school math teacher at U32 and also teaches math at Norwich University part time and was the 2017 teacher of the year.

Thank you for allowing me the time to speak with you today regarding H.128

North Branch Vineyards is an international award winning small winery based in Montpelier VT and we have been producing grape wines grown in Vermont over the past 16 years. Last year, NBV was named the “best Vermont grown/produced wine” at the Eastern States wine competition. Currently, we cultivate 3200 grape vines including 7 varieties on our 13.7 acre farm in Middlesex, VT, which was planted in 2018. We leased our vineyard site prior to 2023.

In past years, we purchased grapes while our vineyard matured and we produced roughly 6000 to 10000 bottles annually. NBV is environmentally conscious. Our bottles are eco bottles made with 30% less glass and our corks are plant based. When we build our new winery/tasting room, NBV will strive to become LEED certified.

In 2023, two natural disasters hit our Middlesex vineyard. We did not produce any wine from our Middlesex vineyard in 2023 because we lost 80% of our vines to the May 18th freeze and the remaining 20% to the excessive rain in July and August. We expected a full crop in 2023 since the vines were fully mature and if we had no natural disasters, we would have picked 40,000 lbs. of grapes and produced roughly \$317,000 in value added wine.

The natural disasters set us back at least two years in revenue and we were forced to seek financial assistance. Unfortunately, the Federal government did not provide any assistance. We were awarded grants provided by BEGAP, NOFA-VT and The Vermont Community Foundation. The grants were extremely needed, but were not enough to cover our losses. Like many businesses in Vermont, North Branch Vineyards needs to be resilient to extreme weather and have additional revenue streams.

The vineyard is located in a rural residential district which is not permitted to have a commercial business. We would like to build an event barn on the farm and host weddings and live music to generate additional revenue so we would not have to ask for financial assistance when another disaster strikes. Under H.128, the event barn would become an Accessory on Farm Business and would not be considered a commercial business.

A report to the Vermont Legislature Prepared by the Natural Resources Board dated January 15, 2023, states that Vermont is a small state defined by its rural character, but its population and land management practices are changing.

The report goes on to say that agricultural businesses – including accessory on-farm businesses – help farms diversify to continue to be economically viable. UVM states, “Vermont farms are increasingly opening their doors to the public. This agritourism connects people with where their food comes from and grows appreciation for the working landscape. This increases economic opportunity for farm businesses in rural areas where farmers can direct-market their own agricultural products — and those from neighboring farms — to consumers. These business relationships are both common and necessary to sustain working farms.”

Based on the survey results from municipalities and farmers, the state agencies identified key objectives for discussion and input from stakeholders as follows:

- Appropriate land uses that support on-farm businesses, preserve farmland, and increase farm viability.
- Update, modernize and support agriculture and farming for the next generation.

The report also states that activities with an explicit connection to farming and agricultural literacy should be encouraged, including specifying whether restaurants and/or wedding venues constitute accessory on-farm businesses, and/or establish appropriate limitations.

In 2023, we purchased our 13.7 acres from our landlord and to date we have had several agencies/municipalities conduct various inspections or reviews on the site.

- On August 11th 2022, we began the process to conserve the land through VT Land Trust.
- On June 20th, 2023, the project was funded by VHCB.
- On September 6th 2023, Jason Fleury with NRCS conducted a hazardous material interview and concluded there were no issues.
- On October 10th 2023, Rebecca Roman with VT Land Trust began the rural enterprise plan which included our driveway/parking area, winery/tasting room and the event barn and was submitted to VHCB. The plan was approved with limitations. The event barn had to be under 2,100 sq ft.
- On October 24th 2023, Jim Eikenberry with NRCS conducted a wetlands review and concluded there were no wetlands.
- On February 20th 2024, Trevor Lewis with the Agency of Agriculture conducted a water quality inspection and concluded there were no issues.
- On January 24th 2024 we went through a preliminary review board with the town of Middlesex. The town wanted to get a rough idea to see what the project looked like. Middlesex DRB provided the site plan standards which include site features, access, parking, layout and site design, landscaping and screening, storm water

management and erosion, lighting, and sign requirements. During the review, some residents had concerns about noise, lighting and traffic. All of the concerns would be addressed at the municipal level provided H.128 is passed.

Lastly, the total agricultural soils that will be consumed by the driveway/parking area, winery/tasting room and the event barn is 28,440 sq. ft. This is equivalent to .65 acres and is less than 5% of the 13.7 acres.

As you can see we have been working on this plan since August 2022 and have had several agencies/municipalities conduct various inspections or reviews on the site. I am asking this committee to take into consideration that if a town/city has zoning standards that AOFBs be exempt from Act 250.

Thank you for allowing me to tell you our story and ask you to pass H.128 removing regulatory barriers for working lands businesses.