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Sam Lincoln, Deputy Commissioner
Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation
One National Life Drive, Dewey 2
Montpelier, VT 05620-3801

To Mr. Lincoln and the Act 250 Legislative Commission,

I am the owner of Winterwood Timber Frames, a custom builder of traditional Vermont homes and outbuildings primarily serving the central Vermont area. We have been in business for 16 years and employ 6 people. We built a new shop and showroom on Route 2 in East Montpelier three years ago to increase visibility, expand production capacity, and diversify our product line to include all things made of wood that are typically found in residential construction.

In 2015 we were awarded a Working Lands Enterprise Fund grant to help with infrastructure for this new building. It allowed us to install two new dry kilns, a waste-wood fired outdoor boiler, 3 phase power to run our machines, and outdoor signage. This investment allowed us to advance our production goals in a shorter period of time, sorely needed from the delay caused by our Act 250 permit procedure.

The 3.5-acre parcel of land we purchased for this shop was originally a part of a larger parcel, at one time a sand & gravel pit which bordered the Winooski River. Since the Act 250 encumbrance runs with the parcel in perpetuity, we had no option but to go through the permit process if we wanted to buy this land. Through months of permitting process, various meetings and studies, not to mention out-of-pocket costs just to find out if we would be allowed to build on the parcel, we found ourselves eventually building in the winter, pouring concrete while the snow fell. Construction costs nearly double for sitework, framing and enclosing buildings this time of year, and ours was no exception.

In general terms I am a supporter of the goals of Act 250 and believe that development should be monitored and regulated to a degree. However, as Vermont grapples with its farm & forest image and how best to promote it, the forest side of the equation has not received equal support as that of the agriculture side. I have imagined forest product companies such as mine being designated a classification that green lights issues such as prime ag soil mitigation. 1.5 acres of our parcel are designated as such, although they are growing trees and are not contiguous with any other farming properties. As we consider our expansion needs, knowing this parcel is encumbered has dissuaded us from building new structures. I'd like to see a 'small acreage' designation for parcels such as this, whose prime ag classification defers to a 'prime forest products' classification.

I'd also suggest a 'prime forest products' label for all projects that qualify to be fast-tracked through an Act 250 special designation, much the way farms only have to abide by property setbacks when constructing new buildings. An initial application could reveal a company's history and annual income, determining its classification as a 'working forest industry company', quick review of intended construction project, and conditional permit issued.

Act 250 could embrace forest product companies as an opportunity to develop land for the right reasons. It could look for parcels that are currently encumbered and seek out candidates that would be suitable for wood-based industry. Instead of a negative hurdle viewed by most, another promotion based angle could be worked in much the way Current Use has tried to encourage farm & forest stewardship.

If the low-margin forest industry is to succeed and continue to be one of Vermont's promotional goals, it's got to have the support where constricted the most, with taxes, land restrictions and various insurance requirements all weighing heavily on our overhead burden.

Thank you,

Andy Harper
Owner