

Hello, my name is Jessie Upson. I'm one of four sisters who were sixth generation to grow up in our family's farmhouse in Craftsbury, Vermont. Two years ago when our parents were getting ready to retire and downsize, two of my three sisters and I came together to try to keep the farmhouse in the family. Our backgrounds ranged from nurse to teacher to herbalist to stay-at-home moms -- none of us had any experience in business -- but we felt we had a vision and a pulse on the community's needs, and with that we invested in the future of our childhood home. In May of 2018, we took over the one side of the building that was run as a B&B by our grandparents and then by our parents, completed some renovations, and reopened as a vacation rental property. On the second side of the building we opened Whetstone Wellness, where we offer yoga classes, hot tub and sauna, massage, facials, reiki, sound therapy, and counseling. The wellness center has not only provided local job opportunities, but it has also quickly become popular with both community members and those visiting from out of town.

We were not quite through our first year of business when it became evident that the fluctuating income of vacation rentals was making it hard to pay our bills during the slower months. We realized that in order for this business to be sustainable, we needed more fixed monthly income. That's when we were approached by a good friend about turning the downstairs of our vacation rental into a restaurant and bar. There has been a huge demand for a place to dine in Craftsbury for quite some time, and it was even on the town's five year plan to create such a place. As soon as we reached out to our local planning committee, Select Board, and neighbors, we were met with nothing but excitement and support. With that, in December of 2018, we revised our business plans and jumped into the Act 250 process with the goal of opening Blackbird Bistro by June of 2019.

The next few months proved to be a crash course in the permitting process. We were determined to do everything we needed to do, the right way, and thought that by being proactive and starting the process in December that we would be able to minimize the amount of time we would need to shut down our rental business for construction and would be able to launch the restaurant just as the prime summer season began. Unfortunately, we were met with the challenges of a permitting process that seems flawed and makes it extremely difficult for small

businesses to simultaneously do things by the book and also open in a timely manner. It feels like everything from the application to the timeline to the support available is designed for large corporations with significantly more financial resources than are available to most small businesses, especially those just starting out.

We submitted the application for the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation in January of 2019. We did everything we could to meet the demands of the Historic Resources Specialist, even when it felt like their requests were really trying to prevent us from being able to move forward with our project -- a project that was designed to preserve history and keep an 1826 farmhouse in our family! Despite this frustration, we completed all of the requirements in order to move forward. Then three months later, one week before the rest of our Act 250 application was to be submitted, we heard back from the Historic Resources Specialist requesting a Historical Documentation Package. We were given a quote of \$2,700, but the consultant we were directed to contact told us that usually this is only required for buildings that are being demolished, not updated. To clarify, the footprint of our farmhouse would not be altered in any way; the only renovations would be some interior updates and kitchen remodel. The Act 250 specialist we were working with told us that the Act 250 board might determine that this documentation package was unnecessary. When we reached back out to the Historic Resources Specialist, explaining that time and money were tight and asking if this was something that we absolutely had to do, she told us "no," but she could request a hearing over the issue, which would prolong our timeline even further. It was only weeks later that it came to light that we could actually complete the documentation package on our own, which while taking quite a bit of time, would save us \$2,700. This was the beginning of what became a trend throughout our Act 250 process: 1) asking the same question to three different people and getting three different answers, 2) trying to complete requirements ahead of schedule only to be thrown surprise curveballs at the last minute, and ultimately) feeling a lot more pushback than support on the state level.

This brings us to the final hurdle that almost ended our business before it even started. After receiving our Act 250 permit at the end of June, we were finally able to begin construction and start lining up contractors

for our septic expansion. This work began full-speed ahead with the hopes of opening the restaurant in time to at least catch the leaf peepers. By the end of August, the construction was wrapping up, and the kitchen and waitstaff were on call to begin training at any time. I knew that we needed to complete water testing prior to opening, so I reached out to the Agency of Natural Resources to find out exactly what they needed from us. This phone call ended up flagging an issue that we had been given the wrong water permit back in the beginning of July. They told us this was their error, but we would be looking at an additional water permit that would cost \$35,000 to complete and would take an estimated 6-10 months. Needless to say, had this information been presented to us prior to construction, it would have called the project. I will spare you the infinite details, including the emotional toll this took on all of us and our families, but that's why we are here today. We are incredibly excited to be part of the economic growth in the Northeast Kingdom, but we sincerely hope that changes can be made to streamline the Act 250 process to make it easier for Vermonters who are trying to raise their families in this state and who are trying to create successful small businesses that serve their communities. Thank you for your time.