

MORE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Not So Sweet Berry

In April 2025, longtime Sweet Berry Farm owners, Jan and Michelle Eckhart, sold their Aquidneck Island Land Trust (AILT) property to Tom Hagerty. Hagerty and his wife live in Boston and own a second home on Indian Avenue. He runs a private equity firm in Boston and co-owns SB Farm LLC (SBF) with real-estate developer Denis Dowdle and others.

In the first year of new ownership, things were mostly the same. The market was reconfigured, cool events added, the strawberry-rhubarb pie was still the best. It didn't feel much different, until a few weeks ago when SBF submitted a new development proposal to the town. SBF contacted some abutters and invited us to meetings, together and separate; some abutters were never contacted.

Now we are doing the good-neighbor outreach they haven't. Some of this is in public proposal at middletownri.gov. The rest of the abutters learned in direct conversations with SBF, AILT, and Middletown staff.

In the proposal, SBF is asking permission to build a new market in a new location. Just steps away would be a new 7,500 square foot

structure they are calling a "barn." SBF revealed to abutters privately that it would be a 200-seat wedding and corporate events space and that more than 1,300 viable apple trees, blueberry bushes, and more will be destroyed to make way for the new buildings, a 36-car parking lot, and a 24-foot-wide truck road.

This is no "barn." This is a commercial operation in a residential zone, one that stands to change the character of a rural neighborhood. Abutters asked many questions to SBF, AILT, and the town. We haven't gotten answers yet.

❖ Why did the Middletown Zoning Board sign off on a commercial enterprise in residential zone in a one-page memo?

❖ Why did AILT submit a letter of support for construction that seemingly conflicts with the easement? Does it have anything to do with Hagerty's donation of \$100,000 plus to AILT in 2024?

❖ Why did they not include a traffic and road safety study up front? Did they consider Howland Park children's playground, just 600 feet away?

❖ Does a new commercial building on conserved land stand

to set a precedent for the Right to Farm Act?

❖ How will this affect Paradise Brook?

❖ How can a small farm go from a handful of special permit weddings to, we don't even know, because they won't share their event plan with us. Are they planning one 200-person wedding a week? Nine 500-person corporate retreats a week? What is the frequency and capacity?

❖ How will the added noise, light pollution and traffic affect neighboring residents' quality of life and property values?

We had high hopes that the new owners would carry on the vision created by the Eckharts. All we want is good neighbors. But is this being a good neighbor?

If you have concerns or questions, email Ron Wolanski, rwolanski@middletownri.gov, and Terry Sullivan, tsullivan@ailt.org. Then ask again at the planning board public hearing at Middletown Town Hall, currently scheduled for Wednesday, April 8, at 6 p.m.

Selene Angier, Debbie Janikowski & Peggy Derry
Mitchell's Lane abutters

Who's Side is AILT On?

I wish to thank Madames Angier, Janikowski and Derry for their letter in the April 2 edition of *NTW* concerning the impending 'hostile takeove' of our dearly beloved, peaceful, quiet, serene, beautiful, lush, Sweet Berry Farm.

And, like many of my friends who had thought of themselves as supporters of AILT, I am quite disturbed regarding the authors' claim that AILT submitted a letter in support of construction of the monstrosity proposed by the new owner, Tom Hagerty. This flies in the face of the whole mission of AILT and other land trusts.

Turning Sweet Berry into a huge wedding and event venue with 7,500 square feet and a 36 car parking lot while removing luscious fruit trees and bushes is a travesty and entirely in conflict with what I thought our land trust was founded to prevent! But a gift of \$100,000 from the Hagartys in 2024 explains it all. If this is true, seems to me AILT just dug their own grave.

Toni W. Ciany

Newporyt

Sweet Berry Farm Conservation Easement Needs to Be Respected

I left Aquidneck Island in 1967 for education and a career in New Orleans. I came back in 2019, not because I had to but because this place still meant something to me.

The property I found on Third Beach Road was a neglected former potato field. It resonated with my Irish farming heritage and the great hunger diaspora that brought my family to Aquidneck Island. Over the past six years I have tried to honor it: a net-zero home and cottage powered by 71 solar panels and geothermal energy, more than 70 trees planted, a living property that takes nothing more from the land than it gives back. I love this land and intend to remain its steward.

So it is with genuine dismay that I oppose the commercial expansion proposed by SB Farm LLC for Sweet Berry Farm at 913 Mitchell's Lane.

Sweet Berry, under the Eckharts, was a treasure: a genuine farm, a neighborhood stand, occasional community picnics and concerts. It added to the spirit of this place without taking anything away. What is now proposed is categorically different: a 26,000 square foot complex including a commercial wedding and corporate events

venue for 200-plus guests, on conserved agricultural land in an R-60 residential zone. The benefit flows to a Boston private equity operator and a Worcester real estate developer, not to the community.

My objections are specific. The entire project was approved by a zoning official in a one-page memo with no public hearing, no variance proceeding, no traffic study. I had to appear before the town three separate times to establish that my small accessory cottage would not burden my neighbors. The disparity defies explanation and the town's duty to protect community welfare.

The 1996 Conservation Easement governing the property was entered into in perpetuity. The Aquidneck Island Land Trust's letter of support does not amend that easement. The town should require an independent legal opinion on compliance before this proposal advances another step.

The proposal also calls for removing more than 1,300 trees and plantings including apple trees, blueberry bushes, cherry blossoms, peach trees and replacing them with parking lots, buildings, and a 24-foot truck road. This sits above the Maidford River and

Paradise Brook watersheds. Most neighboring homes, including mine, depend on private wells. No hydrological study has been submitted. None has been required.

Perhaps most troubling is how this got so far. Key institutional endorsements were quietly assembled before the neighborhood was informed. When a project is structured to avoid public attention, it tends to attract exactly the scrutiny it was designed to avoid.

Middletown is an exceptional community, one worth protecting. Neighbors, town officials, the land trust, and yes, even the new owners, share a common obligation to safeguard public health, safety, and the welfare of the people who live here. That obligation does not yield to private commercial ambition. I ask all parties to honor it.

I urge every resident who cares about this corner of the island to write to Planning Director Ron Wolanski at rwolanski@middletownri.gov and attend the public hearing on May 13 at town hall at 6 p.m.

Keep Sweet Berry a farm, not a wedding factory.

Stephen M. Sullivan, J.D., M.P.H.
Middletown

What's Up Newport | 04-22-26

Aquidneck Island Land Trust Board Members Letter to Editor

<https://whatsupnewp.com/2026/04/letter-to-the-editor-the-conservation-easement-at-sweet-berry-farm/>

Letter to the Editor: The conservation easement at Sweet Berry Farm

Aquidneck Land Trust submits a Letter to the Editor regarding the conservation easement the Land Trust holds on Sweet Berry Farm.

What's Up Newport

Community Submission

April 22, 2026

The proposal to build additional structures at Sweet Berry Farm has raised questions about the role of the Aquidneck Island Land Trust and the meaning of the conservation easement that applies to portions of the property.

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that permanently protects a property's conservation values by restricting certain development or land uses while preserving certain rights for the landowner. These rights and restrictions are negotiated at the time the easement is established and remain in effect even when the property changes ownership. The Land Trust inspects conserved properties at least annually and is responsible for enforcing the terms of each easement.

The Land Trust holds conservation easements on three Sweet Berry Farm parcels in Middletown, including Plat/Lot 125/1, where the current proposal is located. The easement on this parcel dates to 1996 and requires that the primary use of the land remain agricultural. It also explicitly allows for structures that are accessory to that agricultural use, as well as activities consistent with the Middletown Zoning Ordinance and the Right to Farm Act.

In reviewing the current proposal, the Land Trust's role is limited and clearly defined: we interpret the language of the conservation easement and determine whether the proposed structures and activities are permitted under that document. Based on that review, the Land Trust has determined that the proposed structures are consistent with the easement, provided that the property continues to function primarily as a working farm.

While our primary role is upholding the terms of the easement, as a community-based conservation organization we also encourage the Planning Board to meaningfully address any concerns expressed by neighbors and some residents of Middletown, including traffic, noise, and related impacts. These are important considerations that fall outside the scope of the conservation easement but are central to the Planning Board's broader review. The Planning Board plays a critical role in balancing the interests of Sweet Berry Farm to remain a viable and productive agricultural enterprise, while also addressing overall quality of life for surrounding residents.

Lilly Dick, Board Chair

Matt Kirby, Vice-Chair

Terry Sullivan, Executive Director

What's Up Newport | 04-24-26

Sweet Berry neighbor response to AILT's Letter to Editor

<https://whatsupnewp.com/2026/04/letter-to-the-editor-is-sweet-berry-farms-proposal-a-working-farm-or-an-events-business-on-one/>

Letter to the Editor: Is Sweet Berry Farm's proposal a working farm — or an events business on one?

A 1996 easement permanently protects the 85-acre property for agriculture. A Middletown resident argues the proposed 13,862-square-foot barn doesn't fit that definition.

What's Up Newport

Community Submission

April 24, 2026



Applicant's rendering — labeled 'Bank Barn,' 13,862 square feet, submitted to the Middletown Planning Board, February 2026.

To the Editor, What's Up Newport:

The Aquidneck Island Land Trust recently published a letter regarding the Sweet Berry Farm proposal. But it may have left readers more reassured than the facts warrant, because it does not answer the central question: will a project that destroys more than 1,300 mature fruit trees to construct an Instagrammable barn on conserved land result in a working farm, or a commercial events business that happens to be located on one?

The easement recorded in 1996 means this: Sweet Berry Farm's 85 acres are permanently protected for agricultural purposes, binding every future owner, forever. Any structure must be accessory to agriculture — incidental to it, subordinate to it, in support of it. That is a perpetual legal obligation, not a suggestion.

The AILT approved the proposal conditionally, provided the property continues to function primarily as a working farm. That condition creates no enforcement mechanism. Neither document discloses any financial basis for the project — no capital cost, no pro forma, no revenue projections by use category. A 7,500-square-foot two-story barn connected underground to a 4,592-square-foot market and café, surrounded by 63 parking spaces and a commercial loading dock, represents a very large capital investment. What that investment is designed to return, and from which uses, is the question neither document addresses. Once that construction is built on conserved land, it cannot be unbuilt.

Look at the renderings above. The sweeping drive, curated plantings, commercial windows, fieldstone, covered porch and prominent silo are the visual language of a wedding venue. A working farm silo stores grain. This one exhausts a commercial kitchen. Farms grow trees. They don't sacrifice 1,300 of them for an architectural statement.

A structure designed at this scale, requiring commercial event revenue to justify the investment, is not accessory to agriculture. It is a commercial facility that happens to be located on a farm.

The community has been asked to choose between approving this project or watching the farm fail. That is a false choice. There are better paths forward that have not been proposed, evaluated or publicly ruled out. The community deserves to know why.

Sweet Berry Farm deserves to thrive for generations. The question is not whether it should succeed — of course it should — but whether this project is the best we can do for land that carries a perpetual conservation obligation, one that depends on the active commitment of all concerned to mean what it says.

Einstein reminded us that no worthy problem is solved on the same plane as it was originally conceived. Sweet Berry Farm deserves that kind of thinking — from its owners, from the town, from the Land Trust and from the neighbors who care deeply about its future.

Respectfully,
Stephen M. Sullivan, J.D., M.P.H.
Middletown

The Conservation Easement at Sweet Berry Farm

The proposal to build additional structures at Sweet Berry Farm has raised questions about the role of the Aquidneck Island Land Trust and the meaning of the conservation easement that applies to portions of the property.

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that permanently protects a property's conservation values by restricting certain development or land uses while preserving certain rights for the landowner. These rights and restrictions are negotiated at the time the easement is established and remain in effect even when the property changes ownership. The Land Trust inspects conserved properties at least annually and is responsible for enforcing the terms of each easement.

The Land Trust holds conservation easements on three Sweet Berry Farm parcels in Middletown, including Plat/Lot 125/1, where the current proposal is located. The easement on this parcel dates to 1996 and requires that the primary use of the land remain agricultural. It also explicitly allows for structures that are accessory to that agricultural use, as well as activities consistent with the Middletown Zoning Ordinance and the Right to Farm Act.

In reviewing the current proposal, the Land Trust's role is limited and clearly defined: we interpret the language of the conservation easement and determine whether the proposed structures and activities are permitted under that document. Based on that review, the Land Trust has determined that the proposed structures are consistent with the easement, provided that the property continues to function primarily as a working farm.

While our primary role is upholding the terms of the easement, as a community-based conservation organization we also encourage the planning board to meaningfully address any concerns expressed by neighbors and some residents of Middletown, including traffic, noise, and related impact. These are important considerations that fall outside the scope of the conservation easement but are central to the planning board's broader review. The planning board plays a critical role in balancing the interests of Sweet Berry Farm to remain a viable and productive agricultural enterprise while also addressing overall quality of life for surrounding residents.

Lilly Dick, Board Chair

Matt Kirby, Vice-Chair

Terry Sullivan, Executive Director

Sweet Berry Enhancements are Not Accessories to Agriculture

The Aquidneck Island Land Trust wrote a letter regarding the Sweet Berry Farm proposal in the April 30 edition of *Newport This Week*. But it may have left readers more reassured than the facts warrant, because it does not answer the central question: will a project that destroys more than 1,300 mature fruit trees to construct an Instagrammable barn on conserved land result in a working farm or a commercial events business that happens to be located on one?

The Easement recorded in 1996 means this: Sweet Berry Farm's 85 acres are permanently protected for agricultural purposes, binding every future owner, forever. Any structure must be accessory to agriculture; incidental to it, subordinate to it, in support of it. That is a perpetual legal obligation, not a suggestion.

The AILT approved the proposal conditionally; provided the property continues to function primarily as a working farm. That condition creates no enforcement mechanism. Neither document

discloses any financial basis for the project; no capital cost, no pro forma, no revenue projections by use category. A 7,500 square foot two-story barn connected underground to a 4,592 square foot market and café, surrounded by 63 parking spaces and a commercial loading dock, represents a very large capital investment. What that investment is designed to return, and from which uses, is the question neither document addresses. Once that construction is built on conserved land, it cannot be unbuilt.

The sweeping drive, curated plantings, commercial windows, fieldstone, covered porch, and prominent silo are the visual language of a wedding venue. A working farm silo stores grain. This one exhausts a commercial kitchen. Farms grow trees. They don't sacrifice 1,300 of them for an architectural statement.

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a commercial facility that happens to be located on a farm.

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Einstein reminded us that no worthy problem is solved on the same plane as it was originally conceived. Sweet Berry Farm deserves that kind of thinking from its owners, from the town, from the land trust, and from the neighbors who care deeply about its future.

Stephen Sullivan
Middletown

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Barns Don't Need Cocktail Spaces

I am a direct abutter of Sweet Berry Farm, which is under new management. My family has owned and resided at my home for four generations. We feel privileged and lucky to maintain a residence in one of the last tracts of land in Middletown that remains loyal to agrarian roots, natural expanses and relative quiet.

I write today to express deep concerns over the proposed details of the commercial development on the Aquidneck Island Land Trust protected parcel as well as the lack of published oversight that may allow this plan to evolve into a mistake.

What appears to have been shown to the planning board is a structure and use painted as operational upgrades for agricultural use. What the plans actually look like is a 200 plus-person indoor event space, reception grotto and even a bride and groom preparation suite with a commercial kitchen and event furniture storage.

Farmers do not build barns with cocktail spaces. Farmers do not park tractors on dance floors, nor do they accommodate formal dressing rooms in the equipment buildings. Farmers do not cut down old growth orchards to accommodate parking spaces. Farmers don't require impermeable parking, concrete or asphalt to protect high heel shoes from becoming spoiled while walking on property. Farmers who require 200 parked cars regularly on their property for events are not even

farmers; they are event hosts who have farming operations.

My aversion to this proposal is that once this is approved for construction under the auspices of "right to farm," the focus on preservation and sustainable agriculture will become second-chair. This extends beyond this case to other proposals where "farming" becomes the magic exception to commercial development controls.

Based on what little has been made public and information researched by other concerned neighbors, I believe the proposal for commercial development of this farm is not in the spirit of the AILT. It is not in the best interests of preservation of the land nor is it in concert with the conservation of this otherwise agrarian district.

Yes, I am in favor of farming and finding ways for farmers to leverage their land to supplement the diminishing profit that farming can offer in an effort to support a sustainable model. What I am not in favor of is a commercial event property obtaining provisions, protections and exceptions to develop land under the mask of farming operations.

We need true conservation advocates and Middletown residents to raise our voices against this proposal. Friends and neighbors of Sweet Berry Farm are not interested in becoming neighbors of "Sweet Wedding Farm" commercial event operations.

John Silvia
Middletown

Public Comments to Date | As of 05-06-26

TO: Middletown Town Planning Board, AILT, Sweet Berry Farm owners and or Town Council

RE: Public Comment - SB Farm LLC Master Plan Application, 913 Mitchell's Lane

All Public Letters + Emails Available at

<https://www.middletownri.gov/DocumentCenter/View/24845/Public-comments-received-as-of-5-6-2026->

CLICK IMAGE TO READ ALL + DOWNLOAD PDF ON TOWN SITE

Planning Department

Who would you like your message to go to? Ronald M. Wolanski

Full Name Keats Keeley

Email Address

Phone Number *Field not completed.*

Message Mr Wolanski

Please accept this letter in opposition to the Sweet Berry Farm (SBF) expansion proposal.

It appears the new ownership group of SBF is disguising an "event center" inside an agricultural use zoning ordinance.

I am deeply concerned the negative impact to the surrounding neighborhoods and residents has not been thoughtfully considered.

The existing property sits in a non commercial, low density area surrounded by quiet streets and families. Not to mention the close proximity to a recreational play ground.

The impact statements I found, did not account for unforeseen disruptions. Catering trucks, delivery vehicles, associated vendor traffic. All which will be required to access the property from two small public city roads, already in disrepair.

Furthermore, attendees of said "events," departing the facility, will be utilizing quiet residential through ways. Not ideal for young children, residents and playgrounds....

Are there going to be outside (tented or open air) gatherings allowed at the proposed "event center?" Has the impact of excess noise pollution and light pollution been studied during the discovery process?

Has the negative impact on property values been considered for those living near a commercial property, zoned residential?

Additionally, of note is the Aquidneck Land Trust's very ambiguous wording;

"However, should the principal use of the site cease being agricultural, for example if crops and farm goods were not produced on site, the market sold few locally grown products, or the site functioned solely as an events facility rather than a farm,

Letter of Concern to Middletown Town Planning Board | 04-07-26
RE: Public Comment - SB Farm LLC Master Plan Application, 913 Mitchell's Lane
From: Ben Allen, Middletown resident & Sweet Berry area neighbor
<https://www.middletownri.gov/DocumentCenter/View/24845/Public-comments-received-as-of-5-6-2026> (pg 1)

From: noreply@civicplus.com
To: [Ronald Wolanski](mailto:Ronald.Wolanski); aguo@middletownri.com
Subject: Online Form Submittal: Planning Department
Date: Tuesday, April 7, 2026 11:56:13 AM

Planning Department

Who would you like your message to go to? Ronald M. Wolanski

Full Name Ben Allen

Email Address

Phone Number

Message Letter of Concern re: Sweet Berry Farm development

Dear Planning Board,

My name is Ben Allen, and my family and I have been residents of the south Wapping Road area of Middletown since 2009. While we generally feel the town is well-run and the choices our town administrators make are well-founded, we wish to express our serious concerns with the proposed development at Sweet Berry Farm:

> A wedding venue does not seem consistent with the intent of a residentially-zoned area in a land trust
- there are many commercial zones that would be more appropriate for such a commercial enterprise

> Infrastructure is already strained in the area, and the carrying capacity of the land resources strained, which would presumably worsen with increased use:

- the roads are narrow and in bad shape, and can barely support the existing traffic volumes;
- there was nitrogen contamination in area wells some years back, which could be worsened by increased load / lack of sewers;
- groundwater supply has fluctuated with recent droughts, necessitating the deepening of many residential wells
- stormwater runoff has of course been a major issue of late, and while there is presumably a management plan with this development, creation of additional roof / hardened surfaces could worsen the situation, and contribute increased runoff / bacteria-inducing pollution to the 3rd Beach watershed

> Narrow roads, used by children and cyclists, as well as

proximity of a playground, could cause increased risk to public safety.

> Motorist speeding is already a well-established issue in the area (speed bumps, speed cameras, etc)

> Possible intoxicated drivers from events.

So often, development comes to rural areas from outside developers, that over time can lead to the over-developed spaces city people were trying to escape in the first place. Do we really want to turn Middletown into another Newport?

Thank you for considering these points,
Ben Allen
9 Baldwin Rd
Middletown, RI

Email not displaying correctly? [View it in your browser.](#)

Letter of Concern to Middletown Town Planning Board | 04-13-26
RE: Public Comment - SB Farm LLC Master Plan Application, 913 Mitchell's Lane
From: Ella Auchincloss, Middletown resident & Sweet Berry area neighbor
<https://www.middletownri.gov/DocumentCenter/View/24845/Public-comments-received-as-of-5-6-2026-> (pg 30)

From: noreply@civicplus.com
To: [Ronald Wolanski](mailto:Ronald.Wolanski); aguo@middletownri.com
Subject: Online Form Submittal: Planning Department
Date: Monday, April 13, 2026 12:49:23 PM

Planning Department

Who would you like your message to go to? Ronald M. Wolanski

Full Name Ella Davila Auchincloss

Email Address

Phone Number

Message

Mr Wolanski, I reside with my husband and aging parents at 233 Third Beach Road. Firstly, thank you for trying to balance the tension between growth and stability. It is a tension that is always in play. Good, transparent processes can help ease this tension, as you most assuredly know. When the process appears to the public as having been circumvented by those whose wealth can buy them virtually anything, it triggers a reaction that has unfortunately become somewhat routine for our little town. My chief concerns are the long term impacts on groundwater (we depend on well water) and traffic. In the summer of 2015, one of our wells went dry due to drought. It was a very clarifying moment for me about the risks of overdevelopment, especially around the Paradise Valley area. Third Beach Road struggles with motor traffic and speeding when in reality the road is shared with cyclists, pedestrians and horses. It is a small county road that now needs speed bumps to control traffic over the summer. We have enjoyed Sweet Berry Farm for many years and hope to for many more but I don't believe that we need to bend to the Newport Wedding Industrial Complex by adding another wedding venue in a rural area. It is zoned as a rural area and the lure of venue revenue does not change that we do not have the infrastructure to support this kind of use. Please consider a plan that is consistent with the zoning designation and is considerate of SBF's abutters who see this area as a refuge from the craziness in Newport. I look forward to attending the meeting on the 13th of May. Respectfully submitted, Ella Auchincloss

Letter of Concern to Middletown Town Planning Board | 04-22-26

RE: Public Comment - SB Farm LLC Master Plan Application, 913 Mitchell's Lane

From: Stephen Sullivan, Middletown resident & Sweet Berry neighbor

<https://www.middletownri.gov/DocumentCenter/View/24845/Public-comments-received-as-of-5-6-2026> (pg 53/54/55)

April 22, 2026

Ronald M. Wolanski, Planning Director
Town of Middletown
350 East Main Road
Middletown, Rhode Island 02842
rwolanski@middletownri.gov

RE: Public Comment - SB Farm LLC Master Plan Application, 913 Mitchell's Lane

Dear Director Wolanski:

My name is Stephen M. Sullivan. I am a full-time resident of Middletown at 62 Third Beach Road, a short distance from Sweet Berry Farm. I will be out of state on May 13, 2026 and submit this letter in lieu of oral testimony.

Sweet Berry Farm has long been an important part of this community. Like many of my neighbors, I would like to see the farm continue to succeed. I recognize the real economic pressures facing small farms and the need for them to evolve. My purpose is a limited one: to support a path forward that allows the farm to adapt while remaining consistent with the Conservation Easement and the expectations that attach to conserved land.

I. THRESHOLD ISSUE: AN INDEPENDENT LEGAL OPINION

Before evaluating the application in detail, the Board should obtain an independent legal opinion from a qualified Rhode Island property law attorney addressing two threshold questions: (1) what uses the 1996 Conservation Easement permits; and (2) what the 2011 Zoning Board of Review authorized, deferred, or excluded.

Both questions bear directly on whether the proposed 13,862-square-foot development remains genuinely accessory to agricultural use under Section 4.1 of the Easement and whether it falls within the framework established in 2011. The Planning Board should have clear answers to both before acting.

The Conservation Easement runs with this land in perpetuity. That permanence warrants an authoritative, independent answer on the record before any vote is taken. The Board's staff memo notes that the application was certified complete on February 11, 2026 and that under RIGL § 45-23-39 the Board must act by May 12, 2026. The Board should clarify, on the record, whether that deadline can be extended by agreement or tolled to allow adequate time for the independent review requested here, and whether the scheduled May 13th hearing date is consistent with that statutory requirement.

II. THE CONSERVATION EASEMENT

The Easement was recorded on December 31, 1996 and binds all subsequent owners, including SB Farm LLC. It protects approximately 85 acres for agricultural, open space, and scenic purposes. Section 4.1 requires that the primary use be agricultural and that any structures be accessory to that principal use.

The AILT's conditional letter of February 24, 2026 is an interpretive determination, not a recorded amendment. Section 14 of the Easement requires that any amendment be recorded in the Land Evidence Records. The Board retains an independent obligation to determine whether the proposal is consistent with the Easement's terms; that obligation is not discharged by the AILT's letter.

The AILT letter is notable as much for what it withholds as for what it approves. It conditions compliance on the improvements remaining accessory to the primary agricultural use, explicitly warning that the property would fall out of compliance if crops and farm goods were not produced on site, the market sold few locally grown products, or the site functioned solely as an events facility. These are precisely the conditions that the proposal, as described, risks creating. The letter offers no mechanism for monitoring or enforcing those conditions, sets no measurable thresholds for agricultural primacy, and does not address the barn's planned dual use for farm equipment storage and events. It is, in its own terms, a conditional approval contingent on outcomes that have not been secured. The Board should not treat it as a finding that the proposal is consistent with the Easement; the AILT itself did not make that finding unconditionally.

III. NATURE AND SCALE OF THE PROPOSAL

The application proposes a 13,862-square-foot structure on conserved agricultural land in an R-60 residential zone. The applicant's own Development Impact Statement describes a 100-seat café, projects daily water demand of 5,204 gallons, and calculates parking based on commercial occupancy. These are the operating characteristics of a commercial events venue, not a structure that is incidental or subordinate to agricultural use.

That characterization is confirmed by the applicant's own pre-hearing correspondence to abutters, which acknowledges that the frequency and nature of evening events remains undetermined. The Board and the community are entitled to have that discussion openly, with a clear account of what is being proposed, and on what terms it will be enforceable, before any approval is granted.

A development of this scale and cost necessarily rests on financial projections. The Board should require the applicant to produce any pro forma analysis prepared in connection with this project, including projected revenue by use category. If event revenue is projected as a material component of the financial case for the investment, as any arm's-length lender or investor would require, that projection is direct evidence of the facility's intended primary function and bears directly on the Easement's accessory use requirement.

The accessory use framework requires that commercial activity remain subordinate to, and in support of, the primary agricultural use. If the financial projections confirm what the scale of this investment suggests, that event revenue is not incidental but essential, then events are not accessory to the farm; they are the farm's primary business. That inversion is precisely what the Conservation Easement was designed to prevent.

The Board should also note that Aquidneck Island already supports one of the most competitive and well-developed event and wedding markets in New England, anchored by Newport's historic Gilded Age estates and mansions that themselves depend on event revenue for their preservation. The argument that a new commercial events facility on conserved agricultural land is necessary

1. Obtain an independent legal opinion defining the scope of permitted uses under the 1996 Conservation Easement and the limits established by the 2011 Zoning Board of Review decision.
2. Require the applicant to produce any pro forma financial analysis prepared in connection with this project, including projected revenue by use category.
3. Require a comprehensive independent environmental assessment.
4. Impose specific and enforceable conditions consistent with the scope and limits defined by that independent legal opinion.

Proceeding without resolving these threshold legal and factual questions creates a material risk that the Board's decision will not be supported by the record or consistent with the governing Easement. The Conservation Easement was recorded in perpetuity, a promise made to this community that conserved land means what it says. The interests of the farm and the community are best served by honoring that commitment with clarity, full disclosure, and conditions that will be enforced over time.

As I will be out of state on May 13th, I ask that you confirm receipt of this letter, that it be circulated to all members of the Planning Board, and that it be entered into the official record in lieu of my testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen M. Sullivan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Stephen M. Sullivan, J.D., M.P.H.
62 Third Beach Road
Middletown, Rhode Island 02842

Letter of Concern to Middletown Town Planning Board | 05-06-26

RE: Public Comment - SB Farm LLC Master Plan Application, 913 Mitchell's Lane

SL: Concerns about SBF Expansion

From: Katherine Haskins Ringdahl, Middletown resident & Sweet Berry area neighbor

<https://www.middletownri.gov/DocumentCenter/View/24845/Public-comments-received-as-of-5-6-2026> (pg 76/77)

From: [Katherine H Ringdahl](#)
To: [Ronald Wolanski](#); [Chris Costa](#); [Paul Rodrigues](#); [Town Council](#); tsullivan@aitt.org; [Shawn J. Brown](#)
Cc: achuman@aitt.org; kfay@sweetberrypi.com
Subject: Concerns about SBF Expansion
Date: Wednesday, May 6, 2026 1:23:54 PM

Dear Members of the Town Council,

I am writing to express my concerns regarding the proposed development at Sweet Berry Farm in Middletown. My family and I have lived at 8 Baldwin Road in Middletown for 15 years, about half a mile from the farm.

Sweet Berry Farm has long been an important agricultural and ecological asset to the community, contributing not only to local food production but also to the rural character and environmental health of our town. Any proposed expansion of its use should be evaluated with careful attention to long-term impacts.

A central issue is **groundwater sustainability**. Middletown residents rely on a shared underground aquifer system, which is a finite and increasingly stressed resource. The introduction of a high-capacity event space would substantially increase groundwater withdrawals for potable water, sanitation, food service, and maintenance. These withdrawals are unlikely to be evenly distributed and may occur in peak demand pulses during events.

From a technical standpoint, this raises concerns about **aquifer drawdown and recharge balance**. Increased pumping can create **localized cones of depression, potentially affecting nearby private wells and altering groundwater flow patterns**. If withdrawal rates exceed natural recharge—particularly during dry seasons, which is when most events will occur—this can lead to chronic lowering of groundwater levels, reduced baseflow to connected wetlands, and potential saltwater intrusion given Middletown's coastal geology.

Given these risks, it is essential that any approval be contingent upon a **detailed hydrogeological assessment** that includes:

- Pumping test data and modeled drawdown impacts on adjacent properties
- Seasonal variability and cumulative withdrawal scenarios
- Recharge rate analysis based on soil composition and impervious surface expansion
- Evaluation of potential impacts on nearby wetlands and coastal systems

In addition to water resource concerns, the proposal raises important zoning questions. The scale and nature of a 200-person event venue appear to extend beyond traditional agricultural uses and into commercial assembly use. This distinction is significant, as it affects allowable use under current zoning ordinances, as well as requirements for parking, wastewater management, traffic mitigation, and noise control. I urge the Council to carefully examine whether the proposed activities are consistent with the intent and letter of Middletown's zoning code, and whether a special use permit or variance is appropriate.

Another critical concern is the **loss of pollinator habitat**. Sweet Berry Farm currently provides open fields, flowering crops, and edge habitats that support bees, butterflies, and

other pollinators essential to both local agriculture and **broader ecosystem health**. Development associated with event infrastructure—such as expanded buildings, parking areas, lighting, and increased human activity—can fragment or **eliminate these habitats**.

Pollinators are already under significant stress due to habitat loss, pesticide exposure, and climate pressures. The reduction of forage areas and nesting sites could have cascading effects, not only **diminishing biodiversity** but also impacting **crop productivity** both on-site and in surrounding agricultural areas. Any development plan should include measures to preserve and, ideally, enhance pollinator habitat through native plantings, habitat corridors, and limits on impervious surface expansion.

Finally, the cumulative impacts of this proposal—including increased traffic, noise, wastewater generation, and water demand—must be evaluated holistically. What may appear manageable in isolation can become significant when combined, particularly in a sensitive and shared environmental system.

I respectfully urge the Town Council to proceed with caution and to require:

- **A comprehensive hydrogeological and environmental impact study**
- **Clear zoning compliance review and, if necessary, appropriate permitting processes**
- **Limits on event size, frequency, and operational scope**
- **Preservation and enhancement of pollinator habitats as part of any site plan**

Middletown's strength lies in its balance of agriculture, natural resources, and residential life. Protecting that balance requires careful, informed decision-making grounded in both science and community values.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please forward my concerns to the Planning Board Committee and enter this email into the public record.

Sincerely,

Katherine Ringdahl

B.S. Civil and Environmental Engineering

What's Up Newport | 03-07-26

Sweet Berry Farm's new owners seek planning board approval for major development

by Ryan Belmore

<https://whatsupnewp.com/2026/03/sweet-berry-farms-new-owners-seek-planning-board-approval-for-major-development-hearing-set-for-wednesday/>

Sweet Berry Farm's new owners seek planning board approval for major development

Less than a year after the Eckhart family sold the beloved 51-acre Mitchell's Lane property, SB Farm LLC is proposing a new 13,862-square-foot complex that includes a barn designed for events use; applicant has requested a continuance to April 8



Less than a year after Sweet Berry Farm quietly changed hands following 45 years under the same family, the property's new owners are seeking approval for a major land development project that would transform the 51-acre Mitchell's Lane farm with a new 13,862-square-foot complex — including a relocated farmstand, café and a barn designed to accommodate agricultural uses and events.

The Middletown Planning Board is scheduled to hear the application Wednesday, though the applicant has already asked that the matter be continued to the April 8 regular meeting. The hearing is still scheduled for 6 p.m. at Town Council Chambers, 350 East Main Rd. The public may still attend and comment. The meeting is also accessible via Zoom.

Editor's Note: This has been continued to April 8.

New Ownership, Same Name

Jan and Michelle Eckhart, who founded Sweet Berry Farm in 1980 and built it into one of Aquidneck Island's most beloved agricultural landmarks, announced in April 2025 that they were transferring ownership to a new team. The Eckharts said at the time that Jan would continue driving his tractor and Michelle would oversee daily operations. The new owners were not publicly identified in that announcement.

The application before the Planning Board is filed under SB Farm LLC, with attorney Girard Galvin listed as the applicant's representative. The project team includes Northeast Engineers and Consultants of Middletown as civil engineer, Cote Architecture of Bristol as architect, and Verde Design of Jamestown as landscape architect.

The Project

Plans call for construction of a two-story bank barn of approximately 7,500 square feet and a relocated farm stand of approximately 4,592 square feet with a lower-level kitchen, the two structures connected underground by a 1,770-square-foot basement with a vegetated roof. Architectural drawings prepared by Cote Architecture depict the buildings clad in vertical wood tongue-and-groove siding with standing-seam metal roofs, fieldstone foundations, a metal-clad cupola and a ventilation silo. The farm stand would include an exposed timber frame entry, covered screen porch and outdoor seating. The bank barn rises to nearly 39 feet at its peak and includes large barn doors on track, a balcony and overhead garage doors.

The existing farm stand building would either be demolished or converted to purely agricultural use. Plans also call for a 36-space paved parking lot, a loading dock, stone walkways, native plantings, ADA-accessible walkways and ramps, bike racks and stormwater management infrastructure. The existing gravel parking area would be reduced to 27 spaces, with historic overflow grass parking retained.

The applicant is also requesting waivers from two commercial design standards: one requiring parking to be located on the side or rear of a building rather than in front, and a second requiring a five-foot landscaped buffer between the building and the loading area on the north side.

Events Use and Regulatory Questions

Application documents and a Feb. 24 letter from the Aquidneck Island Land Trust both acknowledge the barn is intended for events use in addition to farm equipment storage. The development impact statement, prepared by Northeast Engineers, describes the structure as providing space for "agricultural uses including education, workshops, events, and farm support."

Town Planner Ron Wolanski's March 4 memo to the board notes that events are permitted under the state Right to Farm Act and the town's zoning ordinance, but that each individual event requires a separate special event permit from the Town Council.



**SWEET BERRY FARM
DEVELOPMENT PLAN
WED 3/11 @ 6PM PUBLIC HEARING**

RE: Application of SB Farm LLC (d/b/a Sweet Berry Farm) Master Plan for a Major Land Development Project property located at 913 Mitchell's Lane, and further identified as Tax Assessors Plat 125, Lot 1 proposing:

- to build a new 13,862 square foot structure to house farmstand, café and agricultural uses, and 200-person wedding and events space
- associated site work, including parking, stormwater management and landscaping
- request waivers from design requirements of sections 521.1.B.1 and 521.3.D.3

WED 3/11/26
6:00 PM

ATTEND IN PERSON
MIDDLETOWN TOWN HALL
350 EAST MAIN RD

ZOOM OR CALL
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88265537000>
ZOOM CALL 888-475-4499
Meeting ID: 882 6553 7000

REVIEW THE PROPOSAL middletownri.gov/504/Planning-Board-Meeting-Packets

Middletown's Building and Zoning Official Chris Costa confirmed in a Feb. 25 memo that the project does not require new zoning relief. The proposed farm stand is the same size as the existing one and does not trigger a new special use permit. Costa designated the 7,500-square-foot barn as the principal structure, with the farm stand as an accessory use. The farm currently operates under a special use permit granted by the Middletown Zoning Board in 2011, which authorized farm promotional uses including events in the barn and outside.

Land Trust and Conservation Easements

The Aquidneck Island Land Trust, which holds conservation easements on the property across three parcels, reviewed the plans and issued a letter Feb. 24 stating the proposed improvements are consistent with those easements — provided agriculture remains the primary use of the land.

The letter, signed by Executive Director Terry Sullivan, states the improvements are consistent with the Right to Farm Act, which recognizes retail sales and special events as valuable means of supporting agricultural preservation. However, Sullivan wrote that if the site ceased to function primarily as a farm — for example, if it operated chiefly as an events venue with little local agricultural production — the property would fall out of compliance with the conservation easement.

The farm has also committed to replacing apple trees removed during construction. The Aquidneck Island Land Trust letter notes that approximately 1,200 new trees are planned for planting this year, with the goal of replacing at minimum the number of trees lost.

Wetlands and Environmental Review

A wetlands reconnaissance report prepared by McCue Environmental LLC of North Kingstown, dated Feb. 5, found two areas of freshwater wetland on the property — one near the existing access drive and a larger wetland to the west — but concluded that all proposed work falls outside RIDEM jurisdiction. The larger western wetland is approximately 323 feet from the limits of proposed improvements, well beyond the 100-foot jurisdictional area applied under state rules. A proposed underground electrical connection from Mitchell's Lane was found to qualify for a state exemption for utility lines installed beneath existing roadways and cleared shoulders.

The stormwater system is designed to serve two receiving waterways — Paradise Brook and the Maidford River — both of which RIDEM has classified as impaired and assigned Total Maximum Daily Load restrictions for fecal coliform. The proposed drainage design includes surface swales, sand filters and subsurface infiltration systems intended to reduce peak runoff and improve water quality relative to existing conditions.

No traffic study was prepared. The development impact statement says the existing Mitchell's Lane driveway provides adequate access with good sight lines, and that the project does not constitute an expansion of retail use that would require additional traffic analysis.

Technical Review

The application was certified complete Feb. 11. The Technical Review Committee reviewed it at its March 4 meeting and voted unanimously to forward it to the Planning Board with a positive recommendation, with a note that more detailed stormwater management plans will be required at the Preliminary Plan stage. Under state law, the Planning Board must approve, approve with conditions, or deny the application by May 12.

Written public comments submitted ahead of Wednesday's hearing included letters of support from a farm employee and Middletown residents. The Planning Board packet also notes that comments were solicited from the DPW director, town engineer, building official, fire department, Tree Commission, Roads and Utilities Committee, neighboring towns and RIDEM.

What's Next

If the continuance is granted Wednesday, the next public hearing opportunity would be April 8. Members of the public may attend Wednesday's meeting at Town Hall or join via Zoom at us02web.zoom.us/j/88265537000, by calling (888) 475-4499, using Meeting ID: 882 6553 7000.

The full planning board packet is available at middletownri.gov/504/Planning-Board-Meeting-Packets.

The public hearing begins at 6 p.m. Wednesday, March 11, at Middletown Town Hall, 350 East Main Rd.

Newport Buzz | 04-5-25

Sweet Berry Farm Sale Announcement

<https://thenewportbuzz.com/sweet-berry-farm-sold-to-new-owners-but-not-who-you-think/54898>

Sweet Berry Farm Sold to New Owners—But Not Who You Think

By Christian Winthrop | Newport Buzz
April 5, 2025



Sweet Berry Farm, the beloved Middletown destination known for its pick-your-own berries, homemade treats, prepared foods, and community-centered charm, has officially been sold to a new group of owners. Despite swirling local rumors, however, the Eckharts were quick to clarify that it was not acquired by the Audrain Heritage Group.

Founders Jan and Michelle Eckhart, who have run the farm since 1980, shared the news in an announcement Saturday. “We’re passing the baton to a new team of owners who share our love for this land and our commitment to keeping Sweet Berry the special place it has always been,” they wrote.

While the identities of the new owners remain under wraps for now, the Eckharts assured loyal customers that the farm’s mission and traditions will remain intact. Jan will still be seen on his tractor, and Michelle will continue to oversee daily operations when the farm reopens at the end of May.

Sweet Berry Farm has long been more than just a place to pick apples or sip cider. It’s a community gathering spot, a family tradition, and a slice of Rhode Island heritage. The couple emphasized their deep gratitude to the community that has supported the farm for more than four decades.

“We never imagined how much this farm would grow—or how deeply we’d come to cherish the relationships we’ve built with all of you,” they shared.

Though the next chapter of Sweet Berry’s story includes new ownership, fans can expect the same warm welcome, fresh produce, and homemade goodness when the gates reopen Memorial Day weekend.