

Meeting summary for STR Operator Meeting (04/10/2025)

City of Bath Housing Committee Members Present: Deb Keller, Gretchen Jaeger, Miriam Johnson, Elizabeth Burkley, Leiha Lynn, Rick Bisson

Staff Present: Misty Parker

Attendees: Mary Riner, Philip Wood, Jody & Matt Goodman, Tim & Rhonda Clark, Gillian Ray, Jeannette Haltorf, Donald Hedeman, Bruce Brennan, George Sprague, Gwenda Metzler-Pryor, Richard & Susan Baseman, Patricia Odone, Scott Dunn

Meeting recap

The Housing Committee held a focus group meeting with short-term rental operators to gather input on developing regulations, discussing topics such as licensing, caps on rental units, and safety standards. The committee provided an overview of their work, explaining their policy objectives and the current state of short-term rentals in Bath, while emphasizing the importance of balancing different housing options and addressing potential issues proactively. Attendees offered feedback on various aspects of the proposed regulations, including the implementation of a good neighbor guide, licensing requirements, and fee structures, with the committee encouraging further input and feedback from participants. The intended timeline is to create regulations for Planning Board review and have it brought to City Council for approval in 2025.

Hopes and Fears

The meeting began with reviewing attendees hopes and fears for the short-term rental regulation process and meeting.

HOPES:

- Hope that I can rent my personal unit out over the summer to make extra money for improvements.
- That Bath will have a variety of lodging options available to tourists.
- I hope that people have an open mind about the benefits of Bath ST Rentals.
- Source of income for locals.
- Hope that our residents recognize the benefits Bath receives from rentals.
- Addressing homes that exist only as short-term rentals; not auxiliary units.
- I hope Bath appreciates the complexities of the STR industry and the value it holds.
- Can continue our business with limited issues.
- All STR properties will be treated the same.

- Recognition of benefits to town/region for STRs.
- That we can continue to exist after a decade of welcoming people to Bath.

FEARS:

- Realize there are differences between different STR properties.
- Cost of meeting regulations to owners of STRs.
- I fear regulation to the point of being shut down.
- Increase taxes/increase fees.
- That problems that afflict Airbnb in big cities don't influence policy in small town Bath.
- Over regulation.
- That short-term rentals will take housing away from others who want to reside here permanently.
- Folks don't realize that not all STRs are the same.

Bath Short-Term Rental Regulations Focus Group

The Housing Committee is developing short-term rental regulations and held a focus group meeting with local short-term rental operators to gather input. Misty Parker, the director of Economic and Community Development, introduced the purpose of the meeting and the committee members. Attendees then introduced themselves, including a mix of current and former short-term rental operators, property managers, and homeowners who rent out rooms or entire properties. The group represents a diverse range of short-term rental experiences in Bath, from renting rooms in owner-occupied homes to managing vacation properties. This meeting was open to the public and focused specifically on the 'operators' of STRs. Another public meeting will be held on May 8th to solicit feedback from the general public, with operators welcome to attend then as well. Over the past five years the committee (in its previous Community Development iteration) has heard direct feedback from operators as well as lodging business operators, municipal departments including emergency services, and Bath neighbors/residents.

Background

The Housing Committee provided an overview of their work on short-term rental regulation work in Bath. They explained the process has been ongoing for 5 years, starting with concerns from B&B owners about disparity in regulations. Last April the City Council directed the committee and Planning Board to draft regulations for STRs. The committee developed policy objectives focused on 1) encouraging responsible practices that promote sustainable neighborhoods and positive resident-tourist interactions, mitigating negative

impacts on housing availability while supporting fair competition, and establishing transparent regulations that are accessible and consistently applied. They identified 85 short-term rentals in Bath, with over half owned by Bath residents. A definition of “STR” is still needed and will be among the last pieces to be finalized once all feedback has been reviewed. The committee does not believe there is currently a short-term rental problem in Bath, but wants to maintain a balance between different housing options. The committee is considering regulatory tools like licensing, a potential 2% cap on units, good neighbor guides, and occupancy requirements. They emphasized this meeting is to get input from short-term rental owners before finalizing any regulations.

STR Cap Proposal

A participant questioned the rationale of capping the number of licensed units. The committee shared research on STR regulations often offer 2% of total housing units as a target for balanced short term rentals in year round communities with seasonal tourism demand. In Bath, 2% would be approximately 100 units. One operator shared concern about utilizing a cap, while others liked the concept. Questions related to the process to ensure current operators could receive licenses, whether people would rush to take licenses even if not operating a STR to hold the possibility of future licensing, and whether certain types of STRs (like adding a room in a home) would be exempt from a cap. Some attendees shared experience with communities in other States as well as Kennebunkport cautioning that sometimes popularity of STRs can increase quickly in a community and it is much harder to regulate number of units after the fact. One attendee noted a cap could be could for business as it would reduce competition. Another attendee questioned if the market could support a significant increase in STRs and their experience that the market was already regulating the number of STRs in Bath. Keller emphasized that this is not a cut and paste approach, while the committee has researched the practices used in other communities, this process is meant to be responsive specifically to the unique needs and opportunities of Bath.

Good Neighbor Guides

One regulatory tool discussed was the requirement of hosts providing a good neighbor guide, emphasizing the need for courtesy and mindfulness, and including information about local amenities, noise ordinances, and emergency contacts in the guide. Attendees confirmed that most of these practices were already being implemented, and the guide serves as a preemptive measure to avoid potential issues. It was shared that this is already

a best practice and some attendees offered to share their guides with the Committee. It was also discussed the need for a local property manager in case of emergencies and the importance of accurate addresses for emergency services. Several operators described the steps they take to proactively reach out to their neighbors and confirm that the property is not a problem for them.

Licensing and Fees for Rentals

The group discussed potential licensing requirements for short-term rentals in Bath. Some attendees noted they support the idea of licensing, as it allows for revocation if rules are violated. The conversation covered safety standards, with suggestions to use existing platforms' requirements or implement a separate safety certification. Participants debated reasonable fee structures, with suggestions ranging from \$50 to \$250 annually per unit, emphasizing the need for the fee to be based on implementation costs and not be prohibitively expensive. The group also discussed the importance of clear, enforceable standards and the potential impact on property owners. It was also shared that per unit fees may be a barrier for those renting rooms in their property and options of fees per property or other considerations should be explored. Several attendees noted STRs on their property help offset household expenses and expressed concern about licensing adding too many expenses or barriers. One suggestion was to implement a higher initial fee that could then be reduced according to the STR operator meeting a set of suggested criteria, thereby incentivizing goals and reducing financial burden for operators. Discussion was generally supportive around guardrails being useful to manage the outliers or problematic units, and that most operators were already upholding the standards discussed, but did not want to see the burden (logistical or financial) increase for good operators or for the city's enforcement capacity. Self-certifications, proof of completing the platform's suggested checklist, and direct city-led inspection were all touched on as part of the licensure process, based on what other communities do. Fees should take into account various local and state taxes, other fees that might apply, and parity with lodging businesses.

Airbnb Hosting Challenges in Bath

Attendees were asked how they determined occupancy for their rentals. "Heads in beds" was confirmed as the practical approach operators used and noted they do not permit additional occupants outside of designated sleep areas. Attendees emphasized the importance of maintaining a high standard of experience for guests, including proper occupancy and safety measures. They rely on positive reviews and it is not helpful if their

sleeping arrangements are crowded. The group also discussed the potential impact of Airbnb on the local community, with some expressing concerns about overcrowding and noise. Attendees noted their love for their community and neighbors drives their approach to operating. Attendees also noted regular communication with neighbors to ensure no negative impact is occurring because of their rental. The idea of a "gold star standard" for Airbnb hosts was proposed, which could include deductions for safety features and other amenities. The committee also considered the need for a fee structure that balances the benefits of hosting with the potential negative impacts on the community. Several people advocated for the committee to consider ways to incentivize and provide support for positive behaviors/impact, including things like how the unit is used (repeat business, positive reviews, neighbor buy-in, superhost status, etc.).

The conversation ended with an invitation for further input and feedback from the attendees. Meeting minutes will be shared early next week. It was also shared that a public meeting on short-term rental regulation process would be held **May 8th at 5pm in the City Hall Auditorium.**