

Subject: The Letter **Regarding Russ Cumming**
From: Karen Watts <karen@paintedturtle.com>

This statement was read to the Selectboard on June 6, 2022

My name is Wren (Karen) Watts. I purchased the property at 1397 Burbee Pond Road nearly four years ago. When we - Kermit Blackwood and I - first moved here, we wrote a letter to our immediate neighbors introducing ourselves, and detailing some of our hopes for the property, "Wren's Grove Natural History Research Center."

It is a former farm, and we knew it could again be one. The property and buildings needed work, but we purchased sheds from Jamaica Cottage Shop to help house our research subjects. We have actual plans with real purposes that are not really anyone's business but our own.

None are permanent structures, there are no foundations, nothing set in cement or dug into the ground. Since then various people have contributed sheds and hutches, sometimes even without asking us. None of these are permanent structures either.

One day I received a terse letter from Russ Cumming, ranting about the structures, fences or lack thereof, and informing me that I'm obliged to share our plans to apply for approval of the planning board. It was quite accusatory, and referred to Mr. Blackwood as "your tenant." It was unmistakably rude. His missive lacked so much as a sentence of introduction detailing what his specific authority was in our personal dealings. We had no idea who he was, or why he was complaining.

Mr Cumming sent a similar letter a second time, and included the names of everyone on the Selectboard, as if they were part of this complaint. Which was misleading - several to whom Kermit spoke knew nothing about this letter.

Russ and Kermit have had confrontations. He has literally, over the course of two years sped up and plowed through fowl in the road, directly in front of our house, in full view of witnesses. Five birds in total he has intentionally struck and run over. He all but boasted about doing so at Town Meeting. He then blatantly lied to people we know, pretending that he did no such thing.

Since the summer after we moved to Windham, I have worked at the West Townshend Post Office. It services West Townshend, much of Windham, and even a few homes in Jamaica, all of 05359. This includes Russ and Joyce Cumming. They have both come to the Post Office on any number of occasions and I've always treated them professionally.

Last month the Cummings had a package that wouldn't fit in their mailbox, and as such were obliged to collect it in person at the Post Office. Instead of just picking up his package, he proceeded to demand information: "What are you building behind the house?" "An aviary," I replied. I didn't bother to tell him it is a research installation designed for live video feed data collection of avian communicative behavior. He made it abundantly clear how uninterested he is in our Why.

Mr Cumming proceeded to lecture me about permits and buildings. He fairly barked, "Your name is on the deed, so YOU are responsible for anything that goes on there, you know!" He continued, contemptuous at my attempt to quash the discussion. There were other people waiting for Post Office business, this struck me as wildly inappropriate. It was disconcerting. After many minutes, he finally left, and I could help the other patrons trapped in place through the entire cringe-worthy exchange.

The following day, Mr Cumming returned to the Post Office to mail something. He noticed the board we lodge in the door hinge to prop it open when circumstances necessitate, and said, "Oh, you need a door wedge instead, I will make you one," and even eyeballed the door edge to gauge the height before leaving. It was just unsettling that he was suddenly being nice, disingenuously so. A door wedge has not yet appeared, by the way.

There was also a matter involving a former staff member of Wren's Grove who had his bus parked on the property for a few months. I was exhausted with removing the individual, who had been fired, and consequently squatted until forced to leave, so much so that I can't even remember exactly what Russ's commentary was. He complained about the appearance of the bus, implying he was involved in getting the situation resolved. He may have blustered about things, but as Mr. Blackwood was away on family business, I took it upon myself to research what needed to happen and to the letter of the law. I resolved the situation without any help whatsoever from Mr Cumming.

I remember that whatever Mr Cumming said was awfully suburban and as such entirely out of place in Windham Vermont, where manners matter.

I love this community, and want the best for Windham, I honestly do.

Russ Cumming is not the best arbitrator for what is or isn't right for Windham. It's been clear from my vantage point that he does not want to maintain its historical legacy. He appears to be set on transforming Windham into a leafier version of suburban Connecticut- beginning with doing away with common rural etiquette.