

Sea Dog Brewing taking over Exeter's old Loaf & Ladle

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EXETER — The call for downtown vibrancy has been given one big answer: a 220-seat Sea Dog Brewing Company restaurant that will take over the former Loaf and Ladle location on Water Street.

Founded in 1993 on the coast of Maine, Sea Dog currently operates five New England locations: North Conway, New Hampshire, and Topsham, Camden, Bangor and South Portland, Maine. Known for taking over unique buildings in smaller communities, Sea Dog brews its own beer in Bangor and sports a hefty innovative, home-style menu.

"Right away when we were first considering Exeter, a lot of us were thinking about that area in New Hampshire in general," said Jim Bunting, director of Sea Dog's New England operations. "Exeter is a charming community. That is one of the things we look for, a place we can participate in the community, especially in a place that is a vibrant growing downtown like Exeter. It appeared to us right away the location was rather iconic."

Bunting said Sea Dog enjoys putting its restaurants on rivers, so the location on the Exeter River was a natural fit.

"This property upon walking into it for the first time, I thought right away this was a wonderful location for us," Bunting said. Sea Dog is a restaurant that encourages all age groups, Bunting said, and the former Loaf and Ladle building lends itself to a pub area, dining area and 40 seats for outdoor dining. The restaurant will occupy all three levels of the building, with the second floor able to accommodate events, he said.

Exeter Economic Development Director Darren Winham has been trying to draw in Sea Dog for nearly a year with the help of the building's owner Steve Kaneb.

"My department considers this a colossal win for downtown Exeter, its businesses and vibrancy," Winham said. "This is an historic gateway property and it will always paramount that we find the right tenant. Sea Dog Brewing is certainly that. They will be an immediate regional attraction to the most precious of

commodities, millennials. In economic development speak, this is a game changer."

Winham said his department looks forward to assisting with the local permitting process, including Exeter's first use of 79-E, a community revitalization tax relief incentive that encourages investments in downtowns and village centers. Property owners rehabbing their buildings may receive a period of relief from increased property taxes.

Kaneb said he expects to put more than \$1 million into the building's renovation to accommodate the new restaurant.

"We think this building is key to the success of Exeter's downtown vitality, it always has been," Kaneb said, noting the building has been vacant for nearly three years. "We were very careful in finding the right type of restaurant user."

In addition, Bunting said Sea Dog encourages homemade ingredients whenever possible. "We'll connect with the community whether it be through farming or fishing," he said. "Any aspect of these connections are very good for us in terms of menu." Future diners can look forward to unique dishes such as coconut shrimp tacos, steak tips poutine and a crab and havarti sandwich, while still enjoying classics like a pub burger, reuben or scampi with mussels.

Sea Dog must be granted a variance to allow for additional seating. If that is achieved, it will be green-lighted to move forward with the project.

"The Sea Dog portion of this is really excited, we've been looking at this property for some time," Bunting said. "I know the energy that we have directed towards this and it's substantial. We just need to get through certain checks and balances and make sure we're able to tell our story and what we're all about so the community will welcome us."

Bunting said there are "all sorts of layers of licensing and permitting," but Sea Dog aims for a 2017 opening, perhaps mid-summer.

"In reality, this is going to be a very special location," Bunting said. "We've been at this for a little over 20 years and this is something we'll work very hard to make the community of Exeter proud of."