

Sea Dog gets final approval for Exeter restaurant

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EXETER — The Zoning Board of Adjustment Tuesday night granted Sea Dog Brewing two necessary variances to move forward with plans for a restaurant in the former Loaf and Ladle location on Water Street.

The board approved a proposed increase of 90 seats in the restaurant as well as the construction of a second-story deck overlooking the water.

While issues of parking and scale of the restaurant were raised, the Nowak Room at the town offices was filled with various residents and board members overwhelmingly supportive of Sea Dog's move to Exeter. In terms of parking, many residents in support said they expect to search for a parking space when going to dinner in a vibrant downtown area and that Exeter isn't any different. Others talked about the downtown's walkability, and that the board should take into account how many people and families would be walking from their homes within a one-mile radius.

Economic Development Commission Chairperson Beth MacDonald said the idea of young families dining outside enjoying the Exeter River is something that everybody should want for the town.

"The idea of putting a deck out there should excite everyone," MacDonald said. "We can have a noise ordinance, there are ways to deal with those issues. This is a marquee property. A deck on that building would be beautiful and we should embrace that."

Chairman of the Board of Selectmen Dan Chartrand also urged the application's approval, saying that the town shouldn't let some parking consideration deter "such a great applicant."

"I think this creates more opportunity for our community to come together and galvanize in a communal space," said resident Dan Gustin. "When we look at the future for Exeter, we need to take into account the rich history and certainly the concern of our neighbors, but you can't let it stifle the growth of our downtown."

Former town selectman Bill Campbell said he wondered if the size of Sea Dog was appropriate for Exeter, referencing its nearly double-in-nature size compared to neighboring restaurants.

ZBA Chairwoman Laura Davies said she believed sometimes it takes a large entity as such to make a town "that location."

Neighbors on both Franklin Street and High Street spoke about concerns of late-night activity on the deck, noise levels and lighting. Greg Colling, a High Street resident, said while he looks forward to the restaurant, he said late night noise would "affect his quality of life," as the restaurant is directly across the river from his residence. He said he hopes the restaurant will have limited hours for outdoor activity.

"What I do have concern about is limiting the hours for outdoor activity because that's going to affect my quality of life, if people are out there at night drinking on the deck and people's voices and conversations get lively and rowdy when everybody's drinking beer," Colling said. "It's not going to be ideal conditions for me."

The building's owner, Steve Kaneb, said since the Great Dam was removed, the soundscape on the back of the building has changed, and the flowing river would act as "white noise" for any potential deck activity. Sea Dog Operations Director Jim Bunting echoed that sentiment, claiming deck noise has not been an issue at any of their other locations.

"We knew when we were recruiting Sea Dog that they were a perfect fit for Exeter and the public support and community-first sentiments expressed by Jim Bunting at the ZBA really hammered home that notion," said Economic Development Director Darren Winham Tuesday.

The ZBA approved the variances unanimously. Sea Dog is now green-lighted to move ahead with the project, including the submission of a 79-E application to the town, which gives tax relief to downtown rehab and vitality projects.

Sea Dog officials hope to have the restaurant open by mid-summer.