

# Mega sports, housing, hotel project eyed in Exeter

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EXETER — The long-idle John Shafmaster property abutting the Rinks at Exeter is slated for \$69 million of development with a master plan envisioning a European-style sports complex, active adult community and a hotel/restaurant duo.

The development, broken into three phases, will begin with a \$48 million, 116-unit residential community for people age 55 and older. Negotiations are in the works with owners of the Rinks at Exeter to establish a large sports complex, which would include indoor and outdoor fields, a sports academy and dormitory. Pending the complex's plans, Shafmaster said a hotel and restaurant are likely to follow.

The proposed development would also break open Exeter's tax increment finance (TIF) district, resulting in future tax gains for the town while developing the Epping Road corridor.

Shafmaster and town Economic Development Director Darren Winham have been working to bring the \$21 million sports complex to the industrial portion of the property for more than a year.

"We're looking to bring baseball, lacrosse, soccer and hockey under one flagship brand," said Travis Bezio, of North Atlantic Hockey Group, owners of the Rinks at Exeter. Bezio said the European model of a social athletic club is the basis for the project. Sports are going in the private, elite direction, he said.

The complex would include 60,000 square feet of indoor turf fields with 25,000 square feet of retail space, as well as an additional ice rink. They are working on two outdoor fields, including one with lights for night-time use.

"We're hopeful that the site can work because we're the next-door neighbor, and we're going for a campus feel," he said. The plans include a dormitory as well.

"One of the pieces of the business model is to have a sports academy," he said. "A lot of our customers would be coming from outside the Seacoast area. They're going to require housing." Bezio said stakeholders will soon decide if

Shafmaster's property is right for the project, but they are hopeful adding the sports complex would "really benefit Exeter."

"If the sports complex becomes a reality, that will provide the impetus for a hotel," Shafmaster said. "The complex will require an enormous amount of hotel rooms for kids and parents. It's all synergistic."

The active adult community is scheduled to go in front of the Planning Board Feb. 9. Two years ago, the 116 residential units were approved by the Zoning Board of Adjustment. Shafmaster said he hopes to break ground for a clubhouse and first residential building this fall.

"We're in the design process right now," said Shafmaster, who owns Little Bay Lobster in Newington. "Our research has told us for the most part, they're going to be two-bedroom units and probably three different floor plans." Shafmaster predicted the units would sell for around \$400,000 each. Bean Group will be the project's Realtor.

"I'm part of the age-restricted crop myself and I've owned this land for over 40 years," he said. "In my prior business activity, I built significant outlet malls in the '80s and '90s. My interest at this point is to develop in an appropriate way the land I've owned for a very long time and call it a day. I think the time is right, the atmosphere is good financially. There is the demand. A whole bunch of things have come together. I think the town has an interest to get the additional revenue from the tax increment."

Last March, Exeter voters approved up to \$6.84 million towards infrastructure for the Epping Road corridor, including water and sewer. In addition, they established the TIF as part of a plan to develop much of that area that has lain dormant for years. The TIF is a finance tool that uses future tax gains to finance current capital improvements in designated areas. Once the improvements are made and paid for, the increased tax value of the TIF district becomes part of the town's general revenues.

For Shafmaster's project, water and sewer would be required from Continental Drive and a road would need to be built through the property. Shafmaster wants to pay the difference on the road from the TIF bond. He said the project will add "enormous" taxation revenues after the TIF is paid, "which will be fairly quickly."

"We're very appreciative of Mr. Shafmaster's willingness to front the carry on bond payments until the town is able to reimburse him," Winham said. "This will allow Exeter to utilize the TIF at least one year prior to its anticipated availability."

The TIF Advisory Board voted unanimously last May to let a developer pay the "carry," the difference between the annual bond payments and the amount in the TIF for the initial infrastructure, if the TIF fund didn't have enough resources by the time a potential project needing the water/sewer/road was considered.

According to Winham, the TIF fund currently has \$33,948 with several large projects in motion that will significantly boost the value next year.

Shafmaster said he is aware his property has become popular for its hiking and biking trails, and he has no intention to obstruct that access. In addition, he said more than six months were spent working to avoid wetland impact.

"There are going to be no invasions of wetlands," he said. "The town has its own setbacks, which are substantial. We've been very careful about that. The project meets all of those requirements. We're cautiously optimistic the Planning Board will view this set of plans favorably." Shafmaster said he would like to open the residential community in spring 2018.

"From a marketing point of view, you can get to Boston, Portsmouth, Portland or Manchester, all do-able in an hour or less," he said. "These are not over-the-top million-dollar condos here. But on the other hand, they are not starter condos either. Our expectation is a lot of these folks are downsizing. I wouldn't be surprised if 30 to 40 percent of the people who buy these are from Exeter or surrounding areas."

Winham said when he was hired by Exeter it was made clear that development on Epping Road was a priority.

"These exciting projects, with which my department has been intimately involved for over a year, are a fantastic fit for the Epping Road corridor and a great use of TIF resources," he said.