

# The Exeter News

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# Developing downtown

## Work-force housing, shops part of Water Street lot plan

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EXETER — Amid all the talk about the town's need for parking and affordable work-force housing, a new project is in the works that, to varying extents, could address both.

Portland-based developer Nathan Szanton and his partner Bob Monks, of Cape Elizabeth,

Maine, want to build a mixed-use retail and housing building in the Water Street lot where Citizens Bank is now.

The public will get its first look at the plans Monday night at an open house scheduled for 7 p.m. at the Novak Room at the Town Office building.

The building would fill in the Wa-

ter Street gap between the Town Hall and the existing bank, and stretch back about 30 feet.

Streetside, the building's lower level would house about 4,900 square feet of retail space.

Above it, Szanton wants to build 37 mixed-income apartments. Nineteen of them would be subsidized, and 18 would rent for market rate.

The subsidized apartments would not be low-income housing. Rather, they would be affordable work-force housing — housing for cashiers and teachers, firefighters and mechanics.

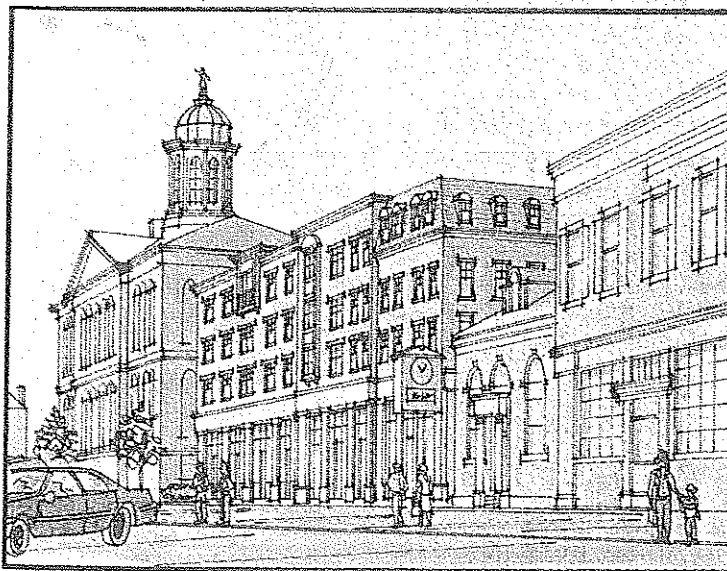
Currently, there are 55 parking spaces on site. That lot will remain as it is, Szanton said.

Plans call for a second, elevated level of parking that would double the number of spots to 110.

The upper level of parking would be reserved for residents of the building and employees of the retail spaces. The lower level would continue to be used by the bank and existing users.

Town Planner Sylvia von Aulock said the building still is in the conceptual stages.

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A proposed mixed-use retail and housing building, in the Water Street lot where Citizens Bank is now located, will be discussed Monday night at the town offices.

# Housing, shops in downtown

## building plan

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"I don't think it will even reach the Planning Board until March or April," von Aulock said.

In order to build, Szanton and Monks would need a variance from the Zoning Board of Adjustment.

Zoning ordinances require two parking spaces for each unit in a multifamily residence, plus one guest space for each two units. Szanton's proposal would require 93 spaces for residents alone.

Szanton said, in his experience, that's overkill. About 28 of the apartments would be single-bedroom, and would not require two spots each.

For the retail space, the code requires one spot for every 200

square feet — 24 in Szanton's case.

Still, parking might be a sticking point for the board, especially in light of the already-tight parking crunch in the downtown area.

"I do think that might be a concern," said Tracey McGrail, president of the Exeter Area Chamber of Commerce. McGrail also sits on a committee formed to address parking solutions in the downtown area.

"The property as it exists is underutilized," she said. "It's downtown, and it's a parking lot."

McGrail said there's a good chance the chamber would support Szanton's plans, though at this stage they're not far enough along.

"We'd certainly support development there," she said.

McGrail said the project wouldn't

solve any parking problems in downtown, nor does she think it would make them worse.

"I see it as another reason why we need to create more parking downtown," she said. "If you want to see a more vibrant downtown, this is a step in the right direction."

"More retail space is a good thing. The more retail you have, the more shoppers you attract, and as the downtown thrives, property values and tax revenues go up," she said. "I think Nathan has the right attitude. He's coming here Monday to see what people have to say, what they want."

Selectman Joe Pace hadn't heard of the proposal, but said the selectmen — and all the town boards — would have to weigh the issue carefully.

"It sounds like one of those situations where you have to sort of pick your poison," he said. "Workforce housing is certainly something the board supports. It's also been well-publicized that we have this parking musical chairs that goes on downtown."

"The community is going to have to decide which it wants," he said. "It will be interesting to see how it proceeds."

The developers go before the ZBA in February. Before that, they will meet with the Historic District Commission.

"Ultimately we'll need their permission, but we're not there yet," Szanton said. "Right now, we're just looking for feedback."

Szanton specializes in multifamily and affordable housing

projects, including Portland's \$4.4-million Casco Terrace project. Thirteen of that building's 27 apartments are subsidized for low-income tenants.

"That was my first project as an owner," he said. "I'd done other building as a consultant."

His second project, Walker Terrace on Portland's west side, has received all the permitting and currently awaits financing.

Szanton wants the Exeter project to be his third. If all the commissions and boards gave him the green light, he said, he'd like to break ground late fall with a completion date of one year later.

He sees the project filling several needs in town, from boosting the vitality of downtown and filling a "missing tooth in the smile

of downtown" to providing much-needed, and much-sought, affordable housing for Exeter's workforce.

"It also would increase the town's property tax revenues," he said. "If we can help the town, then we're pleased to do so."

An estimated cost for the project was not available by press time.

Szanton said he wants to build projects that benefit towns, and his past work speaks to that goal. A Web search for articles about his other projects turns up several that praise his approach.

"That's the kind of relationship we like to have with towns," he said. "If the town isn't saying it wants something, we're not interested in doing it."