

# OPINION

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## 'Smart growth' is a smart proposal

Plan for mixed residential/retail use in downtown Exeter should be applauded

*Editor's note: The writer is the staff attorney with the Conservation Law Foundation in Concord.*

By Tom Irwin

It's no mystery why New Hampshire's Seacoast is one of the fastest-growing regions in New England's fastest-growing state. Its spectacular coastal resources — from the Isles of Shoals to the Great Bay estuary — coupled with the unique and culturally rich communities that have grown up around them, make it undeniably special.

But as intensifying growth pressures translate into house lots

and big-box retail and roads sprawl across the landscape, what makes the Seacoast special is at risk.

The problems of sprawl are increasingly evident: more roads, more traffic, more pollution of our air and water, less open space, less wildlife, less housing affordable to people with average and less-than-average incomes, and, in many cases, less sense of place and community. Amid sensitive coastal resources, the problem is especially acute.

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## 'Smart growth' eliminates sprawl

SMART, from Page F1

According to the N.H. Estuaries Program's current management plan, population growth and development pose the most significant threat to the long-term health of our estuaries. This threat stems from the addition of impervious surfaces (roads and parking lots) that generate polluted storm-water runoff, and from shoreland and sprawl development causing the loss of open space, habitat and natural buffers. The program's most recent "State of the Estuaries" report documents disturbing increases in the rate of land consumption per person in the coastal watershed, as well as increased percentages of impervious-surface coverage and increasing nutrient levels in Great Bay.

Fortunately, as population growth continues in the region, Seacoast communities have a choice — a choice between the sprawling, land-gobbling form of development that currently dominates, or more compact forms of development that avoid the many problems of sprawl and that enhance the vibrancy of our town centers and communities.

Exeter is lucky to be considering a true "smart growth" solution to sprawl. Developer Nathan Szanton is proposing a mixed-use "infill" development in downtown Exeter. With an aesthetically pleasing design that will fit within and complement the style of existing buildings, the proposal includes approximately 3,000 square feet of retail on the ground floor, with

three levels of apartments above. Of the 37 apartments, half will be leased at so-called "work-force" housing rates. Located in the epicenter of downtown, the mix of retail and residential uses will add to the social and economic vibrancy of Exeter's center.

Unfortunately, as with any good and creative plan, Szanton's proposal faces a barrier. Despite including 110 parking spaces in an aesthetically pleasing design (55 parking spaces more than currently exist at the location), the project does not satisfy the local zoning regulation, which would require a total of 165 parking spaces. Szanton's response: a legitimate recognition of the fact that this type of development will result in fewer cars per residential

unit, and the use of an important smart-growth tool — shared parking — that maximizes the availability of parking with fewer spaces.

The problem of sprawl is significant and will become increasingly so as growth pressures continue. As communities begin to make the critical choice — the choice between development that either perpetuates or avoids sprawl — good models of smart growth will be essential. The Szanton proposal is just that — a model of smart, sustainable growth. Szanton is to be lauded for his thoughtful approach to development, as is the town of Exeter for giving the project the consideration it so greatly deserves.

# Apartment plan is scrutinized

## Downtown project must wait for zoning ordinance decision

BY KATE BEGIEBING  
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EXETER — The Nowak Room of the town offices was full on Tuesday night, and people even spilled out into the hallway at a Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA) meeting where developer Nathan Szanton presented his mixed-use retail-housing project plans to the board.

The meeting lasted nearly four-and-a-half hours, and the board decided to meet again on Tuesday, March 22, to make its decision whether to allow certain variances and setbacks.

The building proposed for Water Street would be called the Squamscott Block and be built between Citizens Bank and the Town Hall. The first floor would be retail space and the other three levels would feature one- and two-bedroom apartments.

The proposal calls for 49 spaces on a lower-level parking lot for employees and customers who lease spots. The second level would have 37 spaces for the 37 apartment units. There would be 12 retail spaces and 12 open to the public under the plan.

The ZBA is being asked to waive a town requirement governing parking spaces per dwelling unit. Only 15 spaces would be permitted units under the current space-to-unit ratio.

Another issue is setback. The west side of the building, the side closest to the Town Hall, would come within four feet of the property line. The town requires that a building be 10 feet from the property line. Also, the rear setback requirement is 20 feet and the building comes within two feet of the abutting property.

Senior transportation planner David Walker of the Rockingham Planning Commission was at the meeting to present the board and public with parking data collected by the commission.

Walker said that, on average, Exeter rental units have 1.2 cars.

Walker said it will be "likely that people renting units have fewer

cars than average," because 28 of the 37 apartments would be one bedroom and nine would be two bedrooms.

The board also listened to the public's comments.

Mark Moeller of the Exeter Development Commission said that the town should "jump" at the opportunity to add 12 parking spaces.

Exeter Music Store owner Rich Bowles originally said he did not favor the building project as it was proposed. But on Tuesday night he said he was beginning to consider a change of heart. He said that his one concern with the building is that he does not want to see the parking problem worsened.

Resident and downtown property owner Bert Bourgeois said he opposes the plan.

"A project this size downtown is completely inappropriate," he said.

Bourgeois said that the building was too big and would block many of the buildings in town.

"The people proposing the setback requirements don't live in town. The rest of us do live here so we have to live with the consequences," he said.

Bourgeois said he was concerned that if the building comes within two feet of the church's property line, the church may have a hard time putting an addition on if they want to in years to come.

Bourgeois asked the board not to grant the variance and setback relief but put the project before the voters and see what they want.

Szanton told the board that he would support the church's request to build out toward the property line in the future.

Szanton said that if the board grants the setbacks and variances the next step would be to go back to the Planning Board to review the plans and work on the "technical issues."

Around the same time, Szanton said he would go to the Historic District Commission and see if it would approve the design.

Mike Dawley, chairman of the ZBA, said that if the ZBA does not grant the setbacks and variances, Szanton can submit another proposal. Szanton said later he is not sure what he would do next if his project is denied by the board.

### Hospital staff would benefit from housing

To the Editor:

I would like to take this opportunity to enthusiastically endorse New England work-force housing's proposal to construct new retail and residential space on Water Street in Exeter.

Such a project would be a tremendous asset to the town of Exeter, from both an aesthetic and tax revenue perspective. A project of this magnitude would also significantly enhance the vibrancy of our downtown.

Exeter Hospital is the largest employer in the region. Recruiting qualified, dedicated workers is not easy. Since many of our workers cannot afford to live in Exeter, quality, affordable housing within walking distance of the hospital would be a significant benefit for us as an organization and for our employees.

Please support this project.

Ronald A. Goodspeed

Director of Development and  
Community Relations

EXETER

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