

Outlet plan clears hurdle

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MERRIMACK – Plans for an outlet mall off the F.E. Everett Turnpike took a monumental leap forward Tuesday, as the town's planning board approved a key permit.

However, several board members warned New Jersey-based developer Chelsea Property Group that it still has a lot of work to do, as the detail-oriented, site-plan review process still looms.

Member Alistair Millns described it as preparing "for the next stage of war."

Board members voted unanimously to grant Chelsea a "conditional use permit" for its plans to build 135 high-end shops west of Exit 10.

Several members cited that their decision was based on reports from experts hired by the town.

"If the consultants say 'Yes, it's OK,' I have to go that way," member Stanley Bonislowski said. "And they've answered all questions." Millns added that he is concerned about noise, water-supply issues and blasting.

Still, he said, those are to be addressed during the next phase.

"At this stage, to my satisfaction, I have to say the (conditional use permit) meets my needs," Millns said. "But I warn everyone, in the nicest possible way, we really are going to have to get some answers."

Danielle DeVita, Chelsea's senior director of development and acquisitions, said Chelsea would be ready to do so.

"We are geared up and ready and looking forward to addressing those points," she said, adding that the company would likely get its site plan materials filed within the next 30 days.

That's good news to supporters, including the 600 or so folks who signed a Chelsea-generated petition to urge the planning board's support for the permit.

"I'm pleased that the planning board approved the project to go forward," resident Dennis King

said. "Myself and my kids are looking forward to shopping there one day, to getting jobs there one day. It's a positive thing."

Opponents of the project, no doubt, also will be ready for the next stage. But on Tuesday, some couldn't look past the vote, which, they pointed out, came after just 40 minutes.

"I'm disappointed but I'm not surprised," said Jamie MacFarland, who is a member of Concerned Citizens of Merrimack Association, a group that opposes the development. "What did surprise me was that there was little or no deliberation . . . and I think it was completely disrespectful to the public and all the people involved."

Several opponents said the planning board relied too heavily on consultants to guide their votes when it was the board's job to make sure Chelsea's plans fit the permitting regulations. Mike Mills, also a citizens' group member, said a lawsuit against the town could be on the horizon.

He also said he got upset when he saw DeVita hug Matt Upton, the town's attorney, outside the meeting room after the decision was made.

Mills said he planned to investigate whether Upton's conduct "violated the canons he took as an attorney," and MacFarland said he planned to lodge a complaint against Upton to Town Manager Keith Hickey.

"I think it doesn't mean anything," DeVita said, adding that out of excitement for the outcome she "would've hugged anyone within 5 feet."

Upton could not be reached immediately for comment.

The voting members were Pete Gagnon, John Segedy, Stanley Bonislowski, Alastair Millns, Tom Koenig, Tom Mahon and Richard Jones, who is an alternate, but was sitting in for Chairman Nelson Disco, who has been absent because of a medical matter.

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