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Outlet mall saga picks up Tuesday

Developer is slated to go before planning board, starting site plan review process

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MERRIMACK – The next and possibly final leg of an already years-long battle over a proposed outlet mall is about to begin.

Chelsea Property Group is scheduled to return to the Merrimack Planning Board on Tuesday, kicking off site plan review – a process that board member Alistair Millns described in February as "the next stage of war."

Millns made the comment the night the board unanimously approved Chelsea's conditional-use permit. That crucial step, gained after months of meetings and several time extensions, is the latest event to this point.

Next up is the site plan review process, which is designed to be a more rigorous examination of a development application. In this case, it's Chelsea's proposal for 135 high-end clothing and home-good shops to be built off Exit 10 of the F.E. Everett Turnpike.

Chairman Nelson Disco said the board would handle Chelsea's project "like every other site plan." On Tuesday, Chelsea officials are expected to make a presentation about the project, Disco said.

The board will then look to its bank of consultants and town staff for a recommendation on whether Chelsea has filed everything necessary for the review.

If so, the board may accept the application and move forward with its review.

That acceptance would mean setting off a 65-day clock in which the board would have to accept the plan, accept it with conditions or deny it outright. However, extensions can be granted if the board requests and Chelsea grants them.

During a review process, the board would ask questions to the consultants and, where applicable, to Chelsea representatives, Disco said.

Those and any other issues would be addressed in the coming weeks, Disco said.

For sure, the board would examine several important areas that weren't completely addressed during the permitting process, Disco said.

One is traffic. The state department of transportation has yet to weigh in on Chelsea's proposed plan.

Another big issue is blasting. Chelsea proposes to detonate and remove hundreds of thousands of tons of material to level the area. Neighbors have been concerned about the range of homes that will be protected by pre-blast surveys and other measures.

There will be further scrutiny of Chelsea's construction management plan, which including traffic management during construction, noise and dust control during construction, plus the timing of work activities during the overall building phase.

Disco said that those areas are not an inclusive list.

Tuesday's meeting will likely be a long one. Disco said he typically allows public comment after presentations but wasn't sure what would happen Tuesday because of the potential late hour of the meeting.

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