

Traffic study criticized

◆ **Merrimack Premium Outlet Center:** Consultant says traffic increase at Exit 11 during peak hours would be "small."

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MERRIMACK — The planning board took aim at the traffic concerns related to an outlet mall proposal during a continuation of the site plan review process yesterday.

New Jersey-based developer Chelsea Property Group is seeking final approval to construct 135 outlet village shops on Commerce Drive near Exit 10 of the F. E. Everett Turnpike.

On July 22, Chelsea granted a two-week extension to give planners additional time to review the site plan. The planning board has until Aug. 21 to arrive at one of three conclusions: approve the project as-is, approve it with conditions or reject it outright.

Planning board member Alastair Millns was critical of the traffic analysis provided by Bedford-based Vanasse Hangen Brustlin (VHB), the developer's traffic consultant. He disagreed with the overall impact the project would have on specific intersections in town including the

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intersection at Executive Drive and Amherst Road and the one at Continental Boulevard and Route 101A.

"I've gone through your memos, and not happy," he said of VHB's traffic figures. "I'm not happy with Executive Drive and 120 vehicles going through Executive Drive" in one hour during

rush hour traffic.

"I simply don't agree with your analysis."

Robin Bousa, a traffic engineer with VHB, said she respected the time Millns spent to review the traffic studies, but she disagreed with his assessment of the potential traffic impact the project would have on commuters.

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"You're saying Exit 11 is going to be a disaster," she said. "We're going to have to agree to disagree because we're not proposing any mitigation there. This project itself is not creating a need for that."

Bousa added that the town's traffic consultant, Fay, Spofford & Thorndike, and other departments that have reviewed the traffic improvement plan have signed off on it.

Planner Tom Koenig asked Bousa what the impact on current service would be through the area of Exit 11 during peak travel times, and she said "it's really small. The change or delay is nothing that would be noticeable to the typical motorist."

Anecdotally, Koenig said he sees problems with traffic at other mall-like developments and that could become an issue at the proposed outlet mall.

"I don't go home at rush hour (from his job in Manchester), so I don't have to go through there,"

he said of the evening traffic near Exit 11.

"I see a big problem here and I don't see how it won't be impacted. We have to make sure we have done the best possible evaluation. The traffic is horrendous in South Nashua."

Bousa asked the board to be objective and "weigh this project on its (traffic) impact."

Millns recognized there are poor existing traffic situations in town, but added, "It's not the developer's job to correct Merrimack's roads, but you are not obligated to make them worse."

Beth Burns, an abutter to the project, echoed Millns comments.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see the traffic problems at Exits 10 and 11, and they are only going to get worse with the outlets," she said.

No date has been set for the next site plan review session.