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City parking fee draws fire

By Joe Adler

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PORTSMOUTH - A petition drive has been launched to try and persuade officials to change the city's public-parking system and ease the burden on small business.

Copies of a letter addressed to Mayor Evelyn Sirrell and the City Council have been available for signature this week at The Den. The cafe, facing eviction from its Commercial Alley location, abandoned a move to another location because of the costly parking fee the move would present.

In January, the city significantly raised the fee for downtown businesses that cannot provide additional parking spaces if they expand or bring more foot traffic to a new location. The "parking impact fee" was raised from \$500 to \$1,200 for every unprovided parking space.

"For a business with less than 10 or 20 people, it's definitely a barrier," said Jon Bailey, owner of Bailey Works, a bag-manufacturing company on Congress Street. "Most people are trying to come up with startup money."

The letter, which includes no information about who wrote it, proposes a different fee structure. A smaller business - requiring between one and 19 spaces - would pay a parking impact fee between \$100 and \$1,000.



Larger business projects, with between 50 and 99 spaces, would pay between 50 percent and 75 percent of the city's cost to add a parking space that the owner does not provide. Major projects, with 100 or more spaces, would pay between 75 percent and 100 percent of that cost.

Jay McSharry, who owns four downtown restaurants, said charging a fee so the city can improve its parking infrastructure is valid. But the new per-space charge, he said, is excessive.

"I think it's tough on a small-business owner," McSharry said. "I think \$500 is acceptable. But \$1,200 for a small business is a crazy amount. I think it's something that a corporation like Starbucks and Banana Republic can handle."

The city's Economic Development Commission spent several months reviewing a possible fee increase before it was implemented earlier this year. The commission had found that the \$500 per space was on "the lower end" of what other communities charged, said City Manager John Bohenko.

"That doesn't mean it can't be looked at again," said Bohenko, adding that he hadn't seen the letter but it would be put on the City Council agenda if sent to City Hall. "The issue of small business needs to be looked at; clearly, that's an issue that needs to be reviewed."

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