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Parking impact fees target of petition

By JODY REECORD
Union Leader Correspondent

PORTSMOUTH — When Jim Clark was thinking about relocating his downtown coffee shop a few streets away to a more visible location, he found out he couldn't afford to move.

It wasn't the high rents Bow Street is known for that ruined his plan, it was the parking impact fee.

"If I moved, I would have had to pay \$28,600, so I'm not moving," Clark said yesterday.

His personal experience is one reason he is supporting a petition drive to convince city officials the rates for not having the required number of parking spaces a particular business requires is just too high.

City Manager John Bohenko and Planner David Holden say they have yet to see any paperwork seeking a readjustment of the charges. But Clark confirmed a group is using The Den, his Commercial Alley cafe, as a base for the signature drive.

Early this year, parking impact fees were raised from \$500 to \$1,200.

A parking threshold was established by the city in 1997. From then on, a change in use of a downtown business with fewer parking spaces than set by the threshold, was subject to a one-time surcharge or had to provided onsite parking.

"In general, with the downtown business, providing parking wasn't possible," Holden said yesterday.

The charge is based on the difference between the established use and the new use. For example, if a restaurant was to go into a building formerly used as a church, the impact fee would be the difference between the number of spaces required for a church and those for a restaurant.

Holden said all the money goes back to the city's parking fund, either for parking studies such as the one done on the Worth Lot off Maplewood Ave., where a new parking garage is being explored, or for the expansion of the existing public

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garage on Hanover Street or the maintenance of city lots.

While Clark agrees there should be a fee, he thinks it's too high. And, he said, judging from the number of signatures being gathered at The Den, others agree.

"The community is intensely concerned," Clark said. "I'm not arguing with the need for the money. But the way it's done now, it's like buying a car and then finding out it's going to cost you \$3 million to park it."

Bohenko said he had heard signatures were being gathered, but he had yet to receive a formal request for any action.

"If we get it, we'll put it on the council's agenda," Bohenko said. "A lot of work went into this, but if it needs to be revisited, and there is a request to do so, the council will look at it."

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