

MIDDLETOWN

Town may tighten building-size limit

By Matt Sheley
Staff writer

A new 35,000-square-foot hard cap on retail and commercial development in Middletown will get a final airing tonight at Town Hall.

During a meeting at 7 p.m., the Town Council will consider the proposal, which would make it much more difficult for “big box” stores to come to town.

Under the new rules put together by council President Robert J. Sylvia, such developments would need a variance from the town’s Zoning Board of Review instead of a special-use permit.

“If you look at our comprehensive plan and what it spells out for the future of Middletown, it’s clear we want to be retail-friendly, but not have retail monsters,” Sylvia said.

According to information from the town’s planning office, there are 16 retail and commercial properties in Middletown that measure 35,000 square feet or larger. The biggest is Home Depot in Middletown Plaza, 862 West Main Road, at 112,000 square feet.

Building Official Jack Kane and Town Planner Ronald M. Wolanski said they are unaware of any plans presented during the past year that would have been impacted by the

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ROBERT J. SYLVIA

Middletown Town Council president

proposed changes.

There’s already a 35,000-square-foot limit on retail and commercial construction in general business, limited business and several other zones in town. However, because of a caveat to those rules, developers need only obtain a special-use permit from the zoning board to exceed the limit.

The changes before the council would eliminate that caveat, meaning the only way a developer could proceed with such a project would be to obtain a variance from the zoning board.

Sections 902 and 903 of the town’s zoning ordinances are specific that a variance is far more difficult to obtain than a special-use permit.

The zoning board may approve a variance only if the applicant proves there is a clear “hardship” if the project is not permitted. The hardship may not be “physical” or “economic” in nature, according to the rules.

Kane said it is too early to tell what

BY THE NUMBERS

Here is a list of existing retail-commercial properties in Middletown that measure 35,000 square feet or more, along with their addresses and square footage:

Home Depot	862 West Main Road	112,000
Aquidneck Shopping Centre	99 East Main Road	110,000
Middletown Square	1313 West Main Road	104,000
RK Plaza	288 East Main Road	88,000
Brown’s Lane Shopping Center	1360 West Main Road	78,000
Middletown Plaza	872 West Main Road	75,000
BJ’s Wholesale Club	173 East Main Road	70,000
Toyota of Newport	285 East Main Road	47,000
Benny’s	1400 West Main Road	46,000
Courtyard by Marriott	9 Commerce Drive	45,000
Quality Inn & Suites	936 West Main Road	44,000
Middletown Self Storage	909 Aquidneck Ave.	44,000
Island Cinemas	105 Chase’s Lane	39,000
Howard Johnson’s	349 West Main Road	39,000
Ramada Middletown	425 East Main Road	37,000
Christmas Tree Shops	99 East Main Road	36,000

TOWN OF MIDDLETOWN PLANNING DEPARTMENT

impact the the new ordinance would have, particularly with existing properties that are more than 35,000 square feet and want to improve their sites. He deferred comment on the matter until after he meets with Town Solicitor

Peter B. Regan and reviews the ordinance line by line, should the council approve it.

“I’m not sure how it’s going to be handled,” Kane said. “I don’t want to come out and say something and then

have to go back and switch my position. I want to see what’s going with it and take it from there.”

Sylvia said he hopes the hard cap will help Middletown avoid problems faced in other communities.

“Look at what’s happening in Fall River,” he said. “First it was the abandoned mills, and now it’s abandoned ‘big boxes,’ where the retail chains are pulling out of there left and right.

“With the Internet and Amazon, ‘big boxes’ aren’t doing nearly as well as they used to. From my understanding, the average Target needs to generate \$84 million, yes million, in sales a year. Can you imagine the amount of traffic \$84 million in sales has to generate?”

He — and other members of the council — prefer mixed-use development, which combines retail and residential development with open space.

“For a store to generate \$84 million in sales, you have to be drawing from a larger geographic area than just the island,” Sylvia said, referring to Aquidneck Island. “We don’t need more traffic on West Main Road or East Main Road. We do need business and continued business growth, but not ‘big boxes.’”

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Philip Sherman | Staff photos

Above: Jack McCormack, right, one of several tour guides with the Fort Adams Trust, points to nearby features while discussing the model of the historic fort outside the east entrance on Saturday in Newport.

Left: Tom Peterson, right, and his family take in the view from the top of Fort Adams while on Saturday’s guided tour, part of Newport Irish Heritage Month.

Fort Adams, inside and out

Historic complex is one legacy of Newport’s Irish heritage

By Colin Howarth
Staff writer

NEWPORT — A guided tour of Fort Adams, which I learned was built with Irish labor between 1824-1857, was among the events listed on the calendar for the 39th annual Newport Irish Heritage Month.

Having experienced the Newport St. Patrick’s Day Parade and all its pride and revelry a week earlier, I decided the tour offered a chance to learn what drew many Irish immigrants to Newport in the 19th century and led them to raise families here.

I joined a group of six tourists Saturday for a tour of the historic fort at what now is Fort Adams State Park. Site Manager Jack McCormack, who’s a fourth-generation Newporter of Irish ancestry, led the group.

“I love history and this is such an amazing place,” said McCormack, who has lived in Jamestown for the past 35 years. “It’s a real treat to help organize the volunteers. We have a great group here.”

Newport was the fifth-largest city in America at the time of the Revolutionary War. The War of 1812 demonstrated the weakness of America’s coastal defense, and President James Monroe insisted on the need for a new fortification system along the country’s seacoast.

As we walked through the East Gate, McCormack spoke about the importance of securing Narragansett Bay in the 1800s. If enemy ships occupied the bay, Newport could be used as a base of operations.

Laborers from Ireland started work on Fort Adams in 1824 and were among those on the job until it was completed 33 years later. Hundreds of immigrants worked on the construction. It was no easy task.

The fort’s walls are made of granite that was produced in Maine and

‘I love history and this is such an amazing place.’

JACK MCCORMACK

of Jamestown, a tour guide at Fort Adams

shipped to Newport, and brick that came from contractors throughout New England. A total of 939,696 tons of materials were moved during the decades-long project.

“A lot of the work of Irish went unappreciated,” McCormack said.

The Irish immigrants built their community in the south end of the city in Newport’s Fifth Ward. In addition to building Fort Adams, the Irish worked on projects all around Aquidneck Island, including in coal mines in Portsmouth and constructing St. Mary’s Catholic Church on Spring Street.

Renovations needed

As the tour continued, we entered the interior of the fort and walked through the rooms. Some were renovated and are used for Boy Scout troops and other special events.

However, it appears that most haven’t been touched since they were built. It looks like a project that contractors gave up on halfway through. Big chunks of the walls are missing and doors have been removed.

“There’s a plan to fix it,” McCormack said. “Hopefully it can be a viable place to educate and entertain.”

There’s a possibility it may be the site of an Irish museum in the future, he said.

We continued north and reached the Northeast Bastion, which overlooks the state park and Narragansett Bay. Tom Peterson of Florida enjoyed the view with his wife and two children.

“I lived here for a year in 1985 as a Navy captain,” Peterson said. “Now we’re returning and doing all the sightseeing things. My kids are on



Virginia Brady, left, of Cambridge, Mass., looks at the breadth of the granite fortifications from inside the east gate while on a guided tour of Fort Adams on Saturday in Newport.

spring break, so they’re hoping to see snow for the second time.”

We stopped at the museum at the North Gate, which was donated by the Naval War College. Then we made our way to the tunnels, passing an Irish flag waving high in the northwest corner.

Soldier’s lives

The fort’s state-of-the-art design scared off enemies from attempting to seize it, McCormack said. Without anyone challenging the fort, the Army soldiers stationed there had to entertain themselves. In the early 1900s Fort Adams featured a baseball

field, a 9-hole golf course, a bowling alley and a movie theater.

McCormack gave everyone a flashlight when we arrived at the tunnels. We followed him down a hall where a bat slept in the ceiling, and then down some stairs. When we got to the bottom, the flashlights became useful.

It was dark and wet with a low ceiling. The tunnels were designed in case an enemy was digging toward the fort. American soldiers would climb down into the tunnels and listen. If they heard enemies they were to dig as close as they could, light a

fuse and run in the opposite direction.

The tour was just about over after we emerged from the tunnels. We circled back to the East Gate and prepared to go our separate ways.

“It was a really pleasant tour,” said Bill Mann, who was visiting from Cambridge, Mass., with his wife, Virginia Mann. “We like to do tours of historic places and we’re trying to do as many sightseeing events as we can. This was fascinating.”

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