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Epperson: Rye fishermen need our support; PDA plans detrimental harbor changes

Bill Epperson Guest Columnist

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New Hampshire's eight-mile coastline is dotted with traditional New England architecture as well as more modern and progressive structures. Over the centuries traditions and customs have changed with the times. Industries have come and gone as the decades move on. One, however, has not changed and has endured for the last four hundred years in Rye. Fishing and the community surrounding it remains a constant.

It is centered in Rye harbor, a small but busy port and home to commercial fishing boats that are moored there. Over generations fishing families have poured their lives and fortunes into the structures you see there today. The importance of the harbor was reinforced in 2020 when the state along with the federal government provided funds to dredge the harbor to accommodate commercial and private boats of deeper drafts.

One interesting quirk, the status of the harbor although in Rye is not controlled by the town nor has any significant impact on its mission nor its future.

Through legislation the harbor is under the authority of the Pease Development Authority. They decide who is permitted to work out of the Harbor and on their terms. The businesses that are permitted to do business there pay the Authority for the privilege.

Recently, and seemingly out of the clear blue sky, a change is being promoted by the PDA that would have a significant impact on all the businesses that are located there. Apparently, the existing small buildings which are owned individually and on leased land would be razed with no compensation to the owners. The plan is to replace them with up to eight identical 250 square foot buildings on a raised platform on the opposite side of the access road. The elimination of the existing buildings obviously would have a significant financial impact and could possibly put some out of business, ending decades of family tradition and livelihood.

Although the PDA recognizes the importance of its working status, it is unclear what the final vision is for the harbor. Some see it as the beginning of an attempt to eliminate the fishing industry that has endured for four hundred years only to be replaced by a more retail, traffic intensive and revenue generating operation. As previously mentioned, Rye, heretofore, has not been a part of the plan. The additional burden of more visitors and the traffic it would produce would be taxing on our small but dedicated fire, DPW and police departments.

Additionally, our planning department until recently was not aware of any of these activities. The PDA has done a remarkable job with the former Pease Air Force Base rehabilitation and should be congratulated for its efforts. However, managing what has become an international airport with military importance is a far cry from a small mostly entrepreneurial Rye harbor and others along the New Hampshire coast. The people involved with the harbor, fisherman, tour boat operators and the rest who earn a living there should and must be included in any far-reaching decisions. I urge all who respect the traditions and care for our way of life to stand with our fellow citizens to insure a fair and equitable outcome to what is to come.

Bill Epperson is Chairman Rye Select Board.