

Pownal petition would ban new trailer parks

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POWNAL — A petition is circulating requesting a temporary moratorium on new mobile home parks in the village district.

The petition comes on the heels of zoning bylaw changes that allow new mobile home parks to be built as conditional uses.

State statutes

The Planning Commission recently proposed changes to the bylaws that initially banned new trailer parks. The Select Board changed that to allow parks as a conditional use, saying they wanted to avoid legal challenges. At the time, the board said that Vermont statutes prevented outlawing parks because it would be discriminatory.

"They were on the books as permitted use. We listened to the Planning Board and decided that we're not going to say no across the board," said Select Board Chairman Nelson Brownell. "The problem is that a lot of people think that we're making it easier, but in reality, the Planning Board and the Select Board made it much harder for mobile home parks to move in."

According to Brownell, parks could be built in most areas of the town before, but now they are only allowed in the village, where most currently are, and have to go through the Development Review Board. "They're not allowed to just do it. They need to go through the board," said Select Board member Stephen Kauppi.

Special meeting

The Select Board adopted the laws on Feb. 11, and a group of residents created the petition requesting a special meeting to vote on an amendment that would temporarily disallow any new mobile home parks from being constructed.

According to Pauline Guntlow, who started the petition, the residents have until Wednesday to sign the petition at various stores in town.

Guntlow consulted James Barlow, staff attorney for the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, who said that the ban could be legal. There are exemptions from the statutes prohibiting bylaws from excluding parks, such as if the park is a health hazard or creates economic problems. Pownal currently has the most mobile home parks in the state and many are in poor condition, according to Guntlow.

"Until we fix the problems we have we should not be adding any more," said Guntlow.

Planning Commission member Kathleen Gaffney, who is in favor of the petition, said an overabundance of mobile home parks could have negative effects on local real estate values and the ability to attract new businesses.

"The affordable housing in many of the mobile home parks is in deplorable condition. There is no doubt that the town can put a temporary moratorium on mobile home parks," said Gaffney. "All of those exemptions apply to the town of Pownal."

Health codes are not enforced at the town's parks, and their poor condition is deterring business, said Gaffney.

"We need to take care of the people we have in these parks now and not new ones," she said.

According to Guntlow, the Select Board would need to hold public hearings regarding the moratorium before it is adopted. The other bylaw changes would remain intact.

The Select Board said that it did address the condition of the current parks. The new bylaws have additional requirements for any new mobile home at the existing parks. Those requirements include tie-downs and cement pads for homes.

"It'll take a while but it will get better," said Kauppi.

Select Board member Harry "Hap" Percey said that regulating new trailer parks is not the way to improve existing ones. The board wants to keep the door open for an owner who would build a well-kept park. Percey added that there has not been a new park in years, even when it was permitted.