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## **Shake Shack Coming to Town, But They Want to Bring Their Big Signs with Them**

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**Date :** November 4, 2015

Shake Shack, a popular, upscale fast-food-like restaurant, has signed a lease for the former Chuck's Steak House site on the Post Road and wants to open for business by late summer or early fall 2016.

It also wants a "Shake Shack" sign two feet high in the front of the building, although current zoning regulations allow for businesses to have 10-inch-high signs. Some other retail businesses in town have larger signs than the regulations allow, usually granted through variances to the rules, including nearby H&L Chevrolet and Nielsen's Florists.

A representative from Shake Shack, along with David Genovese, principal at Baywater Properties, which owns the 1340 Post Road site (as well as much of the land and buildings downtown), gave an informal description of their proposed project to build the restaurant to the Planning & Zoning Commission on Tuesday.

The store would have about 3,100 square feet of interior floor space in a building on the front corner of the three-quarter-acre lot, closest to nearby Interstate 95. A rendering showing the design of the building (or a possible design) indicated a modernistic structure.

The restaurant would have 45 parking spaces, 10 more than regulations require. The back of the lot goes to Old Kings Highway South (no entrance or exit to that street was shown).

On one side of the property is Pawprint Market pet supplies store, on the other side is the Exxon gas station (where the wooden bear stands on its hind legs). Across the street is the car dealership property, currently being prepared for Land Rover/Jaguar dealership to move in.

### **Popular**

Shake Shack started as a restaurant in Madison Square Park in Manhattan in 2004 (replacing a "Shake Shack" hot-dog cart started in 2001), and became so popular that lines soon formed around the block.

Since then, the restaurant expanded to various sites in the United States and abroad, including a "Shack" (which is what the company calls its individual restaurants) in Westport. The company now expands at a rate of about 10 new locations a year and earlier this year it became listed as a public company on the New York Stock Exchange (symbol: SHAK).

"I have four kids in the school system, and I foolishly told them that we were talking to Shake Shack," Genovese told the board. "And the next thing I know, rumors were flying around that Shake Shack was coming to Darien."

On Monday, the rumors proved true, when Baywater signed a lease with Shake Shack, he said. A formal application is expected to be filed by late November, civil engineering drawings are nearly done, traffic and parking studies are done, but "a big issue that's come up is signage," he said.

### **What it serves and how it serves it**

The chain serves hamburgers, milk shakes, french fries and other food typically found in a traditional fast-food restaurant, but does so in an upscale way as a higher-end restaurant might.

According to material presented to the P&Z Commission, the restaurant serves hamburgers with no

hormones or antibiotics in the Angus beef. Its hamburger and hot dog buns are non-GMO, and the company prides itself "on using premium ingredients" from ("wherever possible") local sources.

The company says it recycles bottles, cardboard and plastics, as well as cooking oil.

### **Buildings it constructs**

Shake Shack's "Shacks" are "constructed from recycled and sustainable materials. We use energy-efficient kitchen equipment and employ LED lighting."

"We challenge ourselves to make each new Shack more unique and sustainable than the last," according to the company's presentation to the P&Z. "Decades of history line the New Haven Shack, with wooden walls made from old bleacher seats recovered from the illustrious Yale bowl."

### **About that signage**

The chain tries "to maintain that sign, the size and scale" in each store, although the architectural design of the stores isn't uniform, Shake Shack Real Estate Manager Eric Brown told the board.

The sign originated with the first restaurant, and "the way to make it seem different and kind of cool were these [large] letters."

The original store also has the words "FRIES SUNDAES SODAS FROZEN CUSTARD" and other offerings along the lower edge of the roof.

Attorney Robert Maslan of Darien, representing both Baywater Properties and Shake Shack, also spoke before the board. He said the sign as now proposed would stand not exactly on the front wall, but about 10 inches from it, and town officials would have to decide whether or not that violated the regulations and whether a variance should be granted for it.

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He said the Trader Joe's and Orvis signs were also large ones in town, as is at least one of the Darien Sport Shop signs. Town Planning Director Jeremy Ginsberg pointed out that the Orvis and Trader Joe's signs are large because they stand 200 feet from the Post Road, while the Shake Shack sign would be very close to the

road.

To get a variance from the town, the business would need to show it has a "hardship," which could be a difficult argument before a town board Maslan said.

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Genovese pointed out that the H&L Chevrolet sign was given a variance in 1984, although customers going to a dealership to buy a car normally do so after planning and deciding on possible cars to buy, whereas a restaurant like Shake Shack relies more on people buying on an immediate decision — such as driving down the road, perhaps just after getting off the highway, and seeing the sign.

Someone who doesn't see the sign until the last second may also make a sudden turn or stop, which can affect safety on the road, he said.

Ginsberg warned the board that it needs to be careful about granting variances on signs. A sign "has to be proportional to the building, and there has to be rhyme or reason to it [the variance], because if there's no rhyme or reason, we will be here many long nights" listening to other business owners who want the same kind of variance.

### **Shake Shack community service**

"We want to find the right place where we can be part of the community and do something special," Brown said. Each year, every Shack takes part in the "Great American Shake Sale" where, for a \$2 donation, customers can come back another day and get a free milk shake. That raised \$500,000 this year, according to the company's presentation.

Each Shack also "partners with their own local charity" to raise funds and awareness, Brown said. "We would pick a charity in Darien and partner with them in some sort of way," he said.

### **Added benefit: frozen custard**

Maslan said that Shake Shack is one of the few stores around that offers diners frozen custard. With a Shake Shack in town, it will be much easier for Darienites to get that comestible, he said.