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from the December 29, 2005 edition

New England towns aim to keep out restaurant chains

Shapleigh, Maine, is the latest to debate a ban against formula eateries like Dunkin' Donuts and Applebee's.

By Sara Miller Llana | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

As a newspaper reporter, Diane Srebnick covered the division that surfaced last year when a Dunkin' Donuts planned to move into rural Cornish, Maine.

The tension she witnessed between an anti-franchise coalition and Dunkaccino fans spurred her to preventive action: a ban on "formula

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restaurants" in her own community a few weeks ago. A tiny town of 2,500, Shapleigh has no franchises. But Ms. Srebnick, a planning board member, says corporate sprawl is a concern for even the most remote parts of Maine.

"It will happen eventually," she says. "It's better to have our ducks in a row now."

Her measure comes on the heels of two similar bans within two years in Maine. Last month, the seaside village of Ogunquit banned all chain restaurants from its vicinity, following in nearby York's footsteps the year before. In so doing, the Maine towns join a small but growing number of American communities fighting against what they see as aesthetic and caloric uniformity in the form of Starbucks, McDonald's, and Applebee's.

In Shapleigh, residents so far have resisted a ban on chains, but the debate here and elsewhere highlights the tension over how to drive economic development without destroying a town's character. Supporters of such bans claim local restaurants preserve a certain charm, and contribute more to the local community. They say they fear that if one chain is permitted, many others will follow.

But critics say such broad-brushed restrictions hurt development prospects and limit job growth. What's more, they call moves to forbid fast-food chains

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elitist at best, unfair at worst. "It's highly discriminatory," says Dick Grotton, president of the Maine Restaurant Association. "It just happens to be legal discrimination."

Still, he adds, the flurry of restrictions from Sanibel, Florida to San Juan Bautista, Calif., could send a message to chain restaurants that in some markets, they might have to be more prepared to modify their cookie-cutter images.

Formula restaurants include establishments with standardized menus, uniforms for employees, color schemes, or signage - those recognizable logos that decorate places like Wendy's, Dairy Queen, or T.G.I. Friday's.

Residents in California's wealthy Carmel-by-the-Sea were the first to enact such a ban in the 1980s. Since then, a growing number of communities has placed similar restrictions, says Stacy Mitchell, a senior researcher at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. Bans often take shape in liberal, college enclaves, or in tourist destinations.

Some communities have aggressively precluded all formula retail, including big-box stores like Wal-Mart. Others, like one enacted last year in Bristol, R.I., have bans in historic downtowns. Many communities across the country have long had standards for architectural designs, perhaps the most famous being a McDonald's set in a colonial house in Freeport, Maine.

In a world where towns seem to be turning into carbon copies of one another, many towns see an economic advantage to individuality. "There is a very strong sense of wanting to retain a unique character and sense of place," says J.T. Lockman, of the Southern Maine Regional Planning Commission.

Mr. Grotton says the industry has not fought such bans in large part

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because the markets tend to be so small. He warns that towns that impose bans might face unintended consequences, precluding successful family restaurants from opening up branches, for example.

Franchises, he says, can often offer first-time restaurateurs protection, through brand recognition and safety standards. "I have no problem if people want their town to have a certain look," Grotton says, "but having said that, you reap what you sow."

In Cornish, anti-chain residents lost their battle against Dunkin' Donuts, which will soon open in a space shared with a Subway restaurant. Their presence has spurred serious reflection, says Heidi DeCoursey, owner of the Cornish Inn. "Can we live without them?" she asks. And in terms of long-term health benefits, "Do we really need more fast food?"

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