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Busy gun clubs may have to cap membership

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CHESTER -- When Scott Jenkins began his first stint as president of the Chester Rod and Gun Club four years ago, his goal was to boost the number of members to 500. Fast forward to 2013, and Jenkins is learning to be careful what he wishes for.

Like other shooting ranges across the state, the Chester club has seen a jump in members over the past few months. In response, for the first time since it was founded in 1932, the group's board of directors has instituted a monthly membership cap, citing increased demand on club personnel as well as safety concerns.

"We're not doing anyone any favors if all we're doing is bringing people in to get the money," said Jenkins. "I think it has a lot to do with the capabilities of the club. It's one thing to want to grow as fast as you can and not refuse people, but it's another thing to show up on a Saturday and be turned away because there's too many people here or there's a three-hour wait."

The club voted this month to allow only 20 new memberships a month.

According to Bill Hovanasian, a member of the club's board of directors, over the past year, membership has grown by 40 percent.

"Everything here is geared toward safety, which is another reason why you want to limit the numbers," said Hovanasian. "Once you get too many people, things can get out of hand. When I joined, there were 300 to 400 members. Now we're up over 1,300. We were seeing about 70 people a month earlier this winter looking to join." There is a waiting list.

"Right now, we have about 80 names on the list," said Jenkins. "That pushes the waiting time out to August at this point."

"A lot of people who are joining aren't real shooters," said Jenkins. "They've bought a gun because they want to learn to hunt or to protect themselves or their families. Whatever it is, those are the people we really need to focus on because they don't have a strong background in firearms."

Although the cap has been in place just a few weeks, Jenkins said, the reaction from members has been mostly positive.

"The people who were already members have been fine with it, and the people who want to apply, only a couple haven't been," said Jenkins.

Other clubs

The Sunset Mountain Fish and Game Club in Canterbury has a cap of 500 members, with a waiting list after that total is reached.

The Hudson Fish and Game Club checks in as being at membership capacity. Both the Nashua and Goffstown Fish and Game Associations say they have reached maximum membership numbers, while the Londonderry Fish and Game Club currently has no membership cap.

The Keene Planning Board has approved a 26,138-square-foot indoor shooting range and educational building on Ferry



Chester Rod and Gun Club member Thad Hunter of Derry shoots his rifle at the club's range last week. (DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER)



Scott Jenkins, president, Chester Rod and Gun Club, right, and Bill Hovanasian, board member, give a tour of the club's facilities on Thursday in Chester. DAVID LANE/UNION LEADER

Brook Road.

The Cheshire County Fish and Game Club hopes to begin construction in the next two to three years.

The Exeter Sportsman's Club also has no membership limits, but that may change.

"We are still accepting new members, but we are getting to a place where we as the board of directors are beginning to ask ourselves where do we place a limit," said Butch York, club president. "We get anywhere from eight to 15 prospective new members a month looking to join. That's actually unheard of in the colder months, and as the weather gets warmer we'll get even more people. Our membership is still open, but we're closely monitoring the situation on the range."

Personal safety

Jenkins said the people he sees at his range come from all walks of life.

Hovanasian said: "This is an expensive game. People want to learn how to use their guns, get used to them. It'll die down, but for now Mr. Obama has probably been the best gun salesman there ever was."

Joe Kenick Jr., the Exeter club's range captain, said he saw interest in gun ownership leap among women after Kimberly Cates was murdered in her Mont Vernon home in 2009.

Chester Police Chief William Burke said his department has received few complaints over the years regarding the club.

"By and large they are very good neighbors," said Burke. "There have been some noise complaints here and there, and I know the president there is always quick to try and address them when they come up."

Jenkins said he feels the reason behind the rising interest in gun club memberships are concerns over personal safety.

"People are nervous," said Jenkins. "The reality is if something happens at your home at 2 a.m., the police will come, but until they get there it's your problem. How are you going to deal with it?"