

## Mill Plaza Study Committee

David Howland, Chair

Since February, 2007, the Mill Plaza Study Committee has hosted dozens of public meeting and workshops to generate ideas and conceptual plans for redeveloping the nine-acre Mill Plaza property in the heart of downtown.

We have done so with the encouragement of Plaza property owner John Pinto – who in late 2006 suggested the Town develop its vision for the future – and with a generous award of support and technical assistance from the American Institute of Architects' New Hampshire chapter. This includes the pro-bono work of three teams of architects from Portsmouth (JSA), Manchester (Lavalley Brensinger), and Durham (the "Midnight Oil" crew). Now, with the benefit of input from scores of residents on our evolving concepts, we are moving forward with the goal of presenting a final design to the Town Council in early 2008.

We already have much to show for our efforts, including: 1) a comprehensive, publicly-vetted vision statement grounded in the Town Master Plan and other important local policy and planning documents, 2) two rounds of design and public feedback on seven separate concepts, 3) an analysis by RKG, a Durham economic, planning and real estate development consulting firm, and 4) a pro-bono study of College Brook and its buffer by experts in ecology and landscape design from the UNH department of Natural Resources and UNH's Cooperative Extension. All of these can be found on our homepage on the Durham Town Website (from Durham's main homepage, scroll under "News" to our site link) along with agendas and meeting minutes. These materials will be part of a comprehensive report to the Council.

We believe that our partnership's unconventional approach – the process of inviting the community to work with experts in the designing process – represents Durham's best chance to spur a redevelopment that citizens can support and celebrate. Our committee represents a wide range of interests including Durham businesses, the university, the abutting Faculty neighborhood, landlords, the Town library, Planning Board, Town Council, and Historic District Commission. Through much discussion and study, we have generated a great deal of consensus, thanks in large part to the efforts of an excellent facilitator provided by the AIA – Patrick Field of the Cambridge Consensus Building Institute. Below, in broad strokes, are some key elements of that consensus to help guide the final round of design:

**Overall Concept:** The Committee believes that the Plaza should, in broad terms, be considered a "Village Center" and not just an improved shopping center. Thus, mixed uses from retail to office to housing, linkages to Main

Street, multiple forms of access (car, pedestrian, bike), public and open space are all important.

**Housing:** The Committee believes that housing needs to be a part of the redevelopment and that any housing should be built closer to Main Street where student housing is already in place.

**Office Space:** The Committee believes office space should be a key element of the mixed uses on the site.

**Retail:** The Committee is strongly supportive of additional retail on the site.

**Town Library:** Durham needs a new public library. The Committee is strongly supportive of providing space for a library on the site to attract residents during daytime, weekend, and evening hours.

**Open Space:** The Committee supports open public spaces that link the redevelopment to the university and to Main Street – active, multi-functional spaces that encourage lingering and gathering for such events as concerts, discussions, drama, and other activities. The committee supports maintaining the existing pedestrian and bicycle gateway to the Faculty neighborhood via Chesley Drive.

**College Brook:** The Committee strongly supports protecting and enhancing the natural functions of the brook to provide recreational opportunities (such as a walking path) and aesthetic value. This includes treating storm water through innovative low-impact development techniques.

**Vehicular Access:** The Committee recommends that a continuous road be developed through the site from Mill Road to Main Street.

**Abutting properties:** If abutting properties become available, they could be integrated into the overall plan.

The Mill Plaza Study Committee will present its final recommendations early next year after discussing the third and final round of design now underway. We are very grateful for the public participation so far and for the help of our AIA partners. Patricia Sherman, who has worked tirelessly for our community on behalf of the AIA, hopes this open process will serve as a model for other communities across New Hampshire and the nation.

I think I can speak for all of us when I say we look forward to a redeveloped Town center that Durham can be proud of.